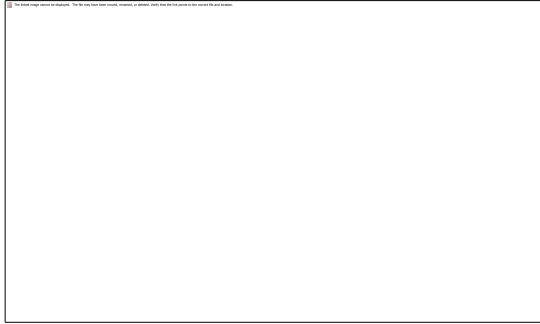


~ Courting Erin ~

by Ambrosia



Disclaimers: These folks belong solely to me. If they remind you of anyone that would be veeery strange *bg* If you're under 18 or the idea of two women in a relationship doesn't appeal to you, you should read something else.

Other Stuff: Since I think that some laws are ridiculous, you'll find upon reading this story that I've modified one or two of 'em to my liking J. Perhaps

someday soon they will be.

Feedback: Like to send me your thoughts? Please do so at SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you.

Peaches. She was breathing in the scent of peaches. Sweet, succulent, intoxicating peaches. With a deep inhale she obtained another whiff. Peaches. These peaches were beginning to make her nauseous. In fact, the very idea of these fruits or food in general made her sick to her stomach. Ooh. Bad peaches.

Since not breathing wasn't an option, she began to open her eyes with the intent of getting away from the scent. Instead of peaches she was greeted with disorderly blonde hair, which her nose was partially buried in. Ah, peach shampoo.

Question.

Who was this peach shampoo user and why was she in *her* bed? Erin's hands quickly discovered something upon their investigation underneath the covers. And why was the peach shampoo user naked? For that matter, why was she naked too?

"I would truly appreciate an explanation as to what in the hell is going on here," stated an irritated voice.

Her heart getting a jumpstart, Erin catapulted into a sitting position. Automatically pulling the sheet over her exposed chest, she looked at the woman seated in a chair a few feet away from the bed. If looks could kill, Erin would have been walking through the tunnel of light at that moment to meet up with relatives who had passed on before her. Because she didn't give an explanation, the fully clothed woman repeated her statement. Her voice louder now, she effectively roused the peach shampoo user. When she moved, Erin looked down at her while trying to ignore the sharp pain in her head.

Sleepy light green eyes met her gaze, swiveled toward the seated woman and then came back to

her. As though waking next to a thoroughly confused person with an irate one a mere few steps away were something she did on a regular basis, the peach shampoo user smiled dazzlingly. "Good morning baby," she softly uttered in such an angelic voice. Despite her perplexed state, Erin wouldn't have terribly minded hearing that voice again.

She didn't get a chance to respond to the greeting since her girlfriend spoke again. "It's bad enough that you cheated on me, but to marry that trollop? Have you lost your mind Erin? I get to show up at my sister's wedding today alone because you did something so very idiotic. I'm going to be the laughingstock!"

"What? I didn't..." Trailing off, Erin slowly shook her aching head. She must have consumed an awful lot of alcohol last night. Having left the bachelorette party the moment it switched into a sleepover (an event she didn't care to participate in), she remembered going to a nightclub. That was why peach shampoo user looked so familiar. They met at the nightclub. Of course, Erin had no recollection of marrying her. They shared a couple of beers while chatting. How did they end up in her Bellagio hotel guest room?

"Yes you did!" Uncrossing her legs, Michelle stood and stormed over to the bed. Erin had two seconds to guess whether she intended to strike her before she laid a sheet of paper in her lap instead. "I think that belongs to you and Mrs. Tucker. I found it on the dresser--your marriage license," she angrily finished.

Picking up the license, Erin glanced over it. Courtney Calloway. Yes, she remembered now. That was peach shampoo user's real name.

"We've been talking for nearly half an hour and I don't know your name," Erin said after swallowing another mini pretzel.

"Courtney Calloway at your service little lady. You can call me Court though."

"Nice to meet you Court. I'm Erin Tucker." Lifting their beers, they clinked the bottles together, each smiling at the other. "Who're you calling little, hmm?" Erin teased, her eyes moving over the other woman's petite form. "I bet I'm almost half a foot taller than you."

Knowing how to take a joke, Court grinned. "True, but I'm older. Therefore, I outrank you."

"I wouldn't be bragging about that if I were you."

Laughing, the blonde drained her bottle. "Just for that comment you have to buy me another beer little lady."

"This is what's going to happen," Michelle started, her hands planted on her hips. "Before we prepare for the ceremony, I'm going to meet my sister for breakfast. When I return to this room you and your wife better be gone. I want you out of this room and out of my life forever. Oh, and this belongs to you. Though I don't know how useful it will be now." Reaching into the pockets of her jacket, Michelle pulled out bits of paper, tossing them toward Erin. They fell around her

like small papery snowflakes.

Looking at various little pieces, the hung over brunette managed to find important words like 'boarding', 'San Francisco', '10:45 a.m.' and 'first class'. Her mouth dropping open, she disbelievably gazed at her ex. "You tore my plane ticket apart? I'm the one who bought it. Why would you do that?" She hadn't even wanted to travel first class, but Michelle talked her into it. If she hadn't felt sick before, she sure did now.

"Because I could." Michelle coldly smiled. "You will pay for this Erin. No one betrays me. No one." Giving Court the dirtiest look she could muster, Michelle headed toward the door. Bolting from the bed, Erin called her name as she followed her. Forgetting that she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, she walked into the hallway allowing the door to close. When that happened, it automatically locked and couldn't be opened unless one had a keycard.

"Michelle don't leave. Let me explain," Erin pleaded just as it occurred to her that the air felt a little too cool.

Stopping just before she turned the corner, Michelle looked at her while shaking her head. "I'm glad that I invited you to my sister's wedding. Otherwise, I might never have known just how stupid you are and how unworthy you are of me. You're naked dumbass." Rolling her eyes, she then disappeared from view.

Feeling much like a dumbass, Erin hurried back to the door, jiggling the knob. Of course, it remained stubbornly locked. She was about to knock when she horrifyingly heard someone else's door opening. Glancing toward the left she spied a child around 6 or 7 skipping out of the hotel room followed by two adults she guessed to be his parents. *Oh my God. No, no, no!*

Turning back to her door, she knocked, hoping that peach sham--Court would hurry up and open it.

She didn't. Damn her. What was she doing?

Erin glanced over her shoulder. They were headed in her direction. If she could have one super power right now, she would choose invisibility. It was highly unlikely that they would pass by without noticing her nude 5'10" frame. Knocking once more, Erin slid down to the carpeted floor, wrapping her arms around bent legs and closed her eyes as though thinking if she couldn't see, then neither could they.

It didn't work. Damn it.

"Mommy look!" The kid excitedly stated, ratting her out. Opening her eyes, Erin helplessly watched as he pointed one little finger at her. "It's a naked lady! I found a naked lady!" He giggled.

Sighing, Erin pounded toward the bottom of the door. *For some reason I'm having seconds thoughts about having children someday.* Approaching, the boy's parents stared at Erin in shock.

Using a hand to cover her son's innocent eyes, his mother told him to go back to their room. After he reluctantly obeyed, she refocused on Erin, not paying attention to the fact that her husband was practically ogling the 31 year old.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Pervert! I'm going to call security right now!" Grabbing her silent husband's hand, she marched toward her room to make good on the threat. Though Erin tried to explain why she was crouched in the hall naked, the wife and mother refused to listen. As her door shut, Erin's opened. Standing, she pushed past Court who was now dressed in the robe belonging to the hotel.

"What took you so long?" The brunette inquired, trying not to scream because it caused her head to hurt even worse.

"Sorry. I had to use the bathroom and while I was there I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I figured you could get back in."

"And just how would I go about doing that? With the key I keep in my pouch?"

Court appeared more amused than upset. "Said I was sorry. I take it she wouldn't listen to you?"

"No." She sighed again. "I have a million questions for you, but for now you need to remove that robe and put your own clothes on because we have to get out of here before security comes up to haul my ass in for indecent exposure."

"Michelle's going to get security?"

"No, the woman a few doors down is. Hustle Court. Please."

It took the pair less than five minutes to get dressed and for Erin to toss her clothes and toiletries into her suitcase. Putting her backpack on, Court followed the worried younger woman out the door. Cautiously checking the halls for people carrying nightsticks and walkie-talkies, Erin headed in the direction of the elevators. She was about to press the arrow facing downward when her wife suggested that they take the staircase. Agreeing, they traveled down six flights of stairs, which led them to the lobby.

"You don't have a car right?" Court asked as they headed out of the hotel/casino.

"No. We rented a car but Michelle has it. How did we get here?"

"My car. Follow me." Remembering the exact place she parked, Court led Erin to a shining crimson Toyota RAV4. Placing their belongings in the back, the women climbed into the car, settling into comfortable leather bucket seats. Reaching toward the glove compartment, Court pulled out a white prescription bottle. Extracting one pill from the bottle she put it back in the glove compartment and grabbed the half full bottled water from the cup holder. After removing the cap, she handed the water and pill to her passenger. "That's a Percocet to help relieve your headache. It's okay to drink the water." She grinned. "I don't have cooties."

"Thanks. What do you have such a strong medication for?" Swallowing the pill, Erin chased it down with two large gulps of room temperature water.

"Migraines. I recall you mentioning that you lived in San Francisco. You ready to go?"

"To San Francisco?" Court nodded. "You're prepared to take me all the way to SF?"

"Yes, I am. I have business there so it's perfect," she told what she deemed a small fib. "I have to be there by Monday, so I figure if we leave today Saturday, we'd have plenty of time."

Erin put the bottle back in the cup holder. "First things first. We need to get an annulment. I say we go to the County Clerk's office and take care of this."

"Annulments aren't easy to get. You need a very good reason and I don't see where we have one."

"We--or at least I was under the influence of alcohol. That should be grounds for an annulment." Pausing, Erin shook her head. "Why...how did we get married anyway? I have a girlfriend."

"I didn't know that until this morning." *Though it probably wouldn't have made a difference.*

"And you *had* a girlfriend." At the other woman's immediate frown, Court apologized.

"Basically, we had too much to drink. You more than I."

Sucking on a lime wedge, Court watched as her new friend drank her fifth shot of tequila. Knowing her limit, Court had stopped drinking alcoholic beverages after two beers and one tequila shot just to get Erin interested in doing them. She ached to be the coarse salt that the tall woman seductively licked from around the rim of the shot glasses. She wondered how that tongue tasted. She wondered how every single area of Erin's body tasted.

"You are so fine," Court stated, knowing exactly what she was saying. "Are you aware of just how incredibly attractive you are?"

Even in her current state, Erin blushed at the compliment. "Um, thanks Court." Her words sounded a bit slurred.

"I'm going to ask you three questions and you say yes to every one of 'em, okay?"

It took Erin's muddled brain a moment to come up with an answer. "I'll try."

"Okay." The blonde smiled. "Do you find me at all attractive?"

"Yes." She blushed again.

"Do you really or are you just saying yes because I asked you to?"

"I do. Really."

Court scooted close enough that their breaths mingled. "If I kissed you right now would you kiss me back?"

"Yes. Really."

That reply caused Court's lips to break into a broad grin. "Last question. Will you marry me?"

A long pause ensued as Erin stared at her with an unreadable expression. "Is that a...a...hypo...hypocrit...ick al?" She practically slaughtered the word.

Court's grin returned. "Are you trying to say hypothetical?" The brunette gave an exaggerated nod. "No, it isn't. I'm seriously proposing. Will you marry me tonight Erin? I want you to be my wife."

Reaching into the basket for one, Erin fingered a pretzel. Her eyes meeting Court's she smiled. Why not marry her? She was attractive and kissable. "Yes."

"That's how it happened?"

Court nodded. "That's how it happened. After you said yes we obtained a marriage license, found a chapel and swapped vows. For a little extra they were willing to record weddings, so I bought a videotape of our ceremony."

Erin appeared thoughtful. "It seems like you meant for us to get married. You weren't drunk."

Court decided to answer that honestly. "No, I wasn't drunk."

"And I was."

"You were."

"You took advantage of that?" Everything fell into place. It all made sense now. "You son of a bitch."

"Last I checked, I didn't have a penis so that would be daughter not son. And I realize that you meant that insult for me, but you inadvertently referred to my mother as a bitch, which she was not. That couldn't be farther from the truth. Please be mindful of what you say." Court's reply was remarkably polite for someone who had just been called an s.o.b.

Erin noticed that she used the past tense when speaking about her mother. "Did your mother pass away?"

Court nodded. "When I was twelve. I don't need an apology," she quickly added, instinctively knowing the other woman was about to give her one. "Her death shouldn't make me any less of a

jerk in your eyes, so what were you about to say?" When Erin hesitated, she smiled. "Come on. I know you have a theory. Share."

I don't understand you at all. Erin suddenly had second thoughts regarding her theory on why Court wanted to marry her. True, she had just met Court Calloway, but labeling her as a gold digger seemed very wrong. "I take it that this has nothing to do with my assets?"

"Is that what you thought? I married you for your money?"

"I can't think of any other reason. It's not like you love me." Even as she said this she searched the blonde's face. Court's expression gave nothing away. "Here are the facts. You were sober when you asked me to marry you--that was intentional. And it seems that you don't want to annul it, so that begs the question of why. If not for love, another reason to marry someone is for financial purposes." The ringing of Erin's cell phone caused Court to temporarily withhold her reply.

Digging the phone out of her pants pocket, Erin brought it to her ear. "Hello? Oh, hello Mr. Braddock. Yes? Uh huh. But sir I--yes." There was a long pause on her end of the line as Erin rubbed her temples with her free hand. Her lips pursing, she shut off the phone and shoved it back into her pocket. Taking a deep breath she looked at a quizzical Court. "If you did want my money, you might not object to that annulment now."

"What happened?"

"Michelle meant what she said about my paying. That was her father who called. Since he's my boss, he has the right to fire me and he just exercised that right. So I'm unemployed living in an expensive apartment that I won't be able to afford much longer. I knew I shouldn't have gotten involved with my boss's daughter. That was just asking for trouble." Staring out of the passenger window, she bit her bottom lip wanting to cry or scream in frustration. Perhaps do both. "Could this day get any worse?"

"If it's any consolation to you, I didn't want your money," Court gently said.

"So you married me because?"

"It's an experiment of sorts. Stay married to me for six months and I'll handsomely reimburse you."

Erin looked at her like she was crazy. "You'll pay me in order to stay married to me?" The blonde nodded. "Why? That makes no sense."

"I want to try my hand at writing a novel," another fib, "about two people who don't know each other but they impulsively get married. The novel will follow them over the next six to twelve months of their marriage. I haven't decided if it'll be a drama or comedy yet. Perhaps one of those dramadies. Of course, research would be nice so I was thinking that we could use this marriage to our advantages. Me for my novel and you for one million dollars, which you will

receive after six months. Then we can get divorced. How is that?" When Erin only stared at her, she repeated, "How is that? Erin?"

Blinking, Erin looked incredulous. "You're going to give me one million dollars to be your wife for six months." She glanced toward the rear of the car where clothes and personal items were strewn. "It looks like you live in your car. Where is this one million dollars coming from?"

"The majority of the time I do live in my car and the money is in one of my bank accounts."

"So why do you live in your car if you have that kind of money?"

"Here are the cliff notes of my life. Listening?"

"All ears."

"Until a little over a year ago I was a lawyer--a very prosperous lawyer. After ten years I made up my mind to retire at age 36. Except for some of my more casual clothing, laptop, and cell phone I sold just about everything else that I owned. My house, which I made a tidy profit off of, my Jaguar, televisions, computers, minimum five-hundred dollar suits...everything had to go. I became an Ebay selling junkie. Was pretty good at it too." Court grinned. "I even turned in my stocks. Two months after retiring I bought this car and decided that I was going to travel, something I always planned on doing but never left the states.

I practiced in Boston and up until my retirement the only places I went on vacation were California and New York--once each. I got myself a passport and that's what I've been doing for a year now. My latest stop as you can see is Las Vegas and since meeting you last night at that club I decided to settle down and write a book. Don't know if I can but I'm willing to try. It would be nice to have someone--namely you to hang with for a while. Be domesticated. I'd like to take a break from traveling."

"You just decided to write a book last night when we met?"

"Well I've been thinking about it for a couple of months now. Last night was when I made my decision to go through with it. That's if you're interested. You wouldn't have to worry about your rent and I promise I'll be a good roommate."

"I know you don't mean it that way, but Court by going through with this it sounds like I'd be prostituting myself."

"If that's true there are more prostitutes then I thought in this world. Despite your wanting to get an annulment, for now you and I are each other's spouse. We are supposed to take care of each other, be there for each other through good times and bad. Right now you don't have a job and until you get one I am perfectly willing to handle our financial responsibilities. We're partners. Don't let your pride stand in the way. Besides, I feel some responsibility since it is partly my fault that you were fired. Will you please stay married to me?"

"So we'll live like a married couple?"

"In every sense except intimately. That's not necessary." *Though I wouldn't necessarily have a problem with that...*

"That reminds me. Did we..." Blushing, Erin quietly finished, "consummate our marriage last night?"

"No, we never had sex."

"Then why were we naked?"

Bypassing carrying her bride over the threshold since she outweighed her by 15-20 pounds, Court merely waited for her to enter the hotel room before following. Finding the light switch, she illuminated the spacious room. Removing her jacket, she walked further inside, depositing it over the back of a chair as she looked around.

"This is nice Mrs. Calloway." She grinned at the swaying woman headed toward her.

"Glad you like it Mrs. Tucker." Her lips aimed for Court's mouth but miscalculated by landing on her nose. Releasing a hiccupping chuckle, Erin stumbled toward the bed, sitting on the edge of it. She attempted to undo the buttons of her shirt, but after a full minute passed had yet to slip the first one out.

"Let me help you baby." Kneeling on the floor, Court proceeded to unbutton her shirt. She would undress her wife and put her into bed, but she had zero intention of sleeping with her. If they ever consummated this marriage, she didn't want it to be when Erin was too inebriated to walk straight. Looking into her face she could tell that the younger woman was having a difficult time keeping her eyes open. They would get some sleep tonight and in the morning she would see what happened.

"You undressed me and yourself, we got into bed and went to sleep."

Court confirmed with a brief nod. "That's all that happened."

"If I agree to this we have to split everything 50/50--partners can do that. I have a small nest egg and I'll start looking for another job as soon as we get to San Francisco." She paused thoughtfully. "Do you really have business there on Monday?"

"I'm all for that and no I don't. I just said that as an excuse to escort you the 500+ miles to where you live."

Erin smiled for the first time that day. "I like your honesty Court."

She tried not to look guilty. *You give me too much credit.*

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Erin asked for the fifth time in the last hour. After they enjoyed a leisurely brunch at the expansive buffet located inside the Rio Hotel/Casino, they headed for the road. About fifty miles into their journey Court found on her online map what she proposed to be a shortcut that would save them close to thirty miles. Erin grew worried when she hadn't seen cars since they deserted the main road.

"Of course I know," Court responded, not sounding quite as sure as she had the last time her wife asked that particular question. She was loath to admit that she didn't have a damn clue where she was going. They could be heading farther away from San Francisco for all she knew. *Don't let your pride stand in the way.* She had uttered those words earlier yet she wasn't paying any attention to them.

Lifting Court's portable computer onto her lap, Erin studied the map. "We should be on the I-15 you know."

"Yes, I know. Everything is fine." Court's voice maintained that constant pleasantness. Not that she had any inclination to do so, but Erin idly wondered what would make her tick.

"I have an idea." The driver indicated for her to continue. "Why don't we turn around and head back in the opposite direction where we'll eventually find the I-15 again? From there we can just follow the main directions. It's not like we're in a hurry."

Court drove a ¼ of a mile further before she made a u-turn on the dirt path. Erin was right. This shortcut was leading them only God knew where. They managed to get within the vicinity of the I-15 before the Toyota chugged to a complete stop. When Erin inquired on why they weren't moving, Court informed her that they were out of gas. During the not so much of a shortcut drive she had noticed that they were dangerously near the empty mark but hoped that they would reach civilization before the car stopped.

"No problem," the blonde cheerily stated as she tapped on her laptop's keyboard. "According to this, there's a Shell station about three miles from us. You can rest here while I go get us some gasoline. Feel free to play with the computer. It has a long-lasting battery pack. I recommend a game called Literati if you're good with words." She was about to get out of the car when Erin wrapped a hand around her arm.

"Wait a minute. You don't think I'm going to let you walk all by yourself do you? I'm coming with."

Court smiled at her while gently patting the hand still surrounding her forearm. "Baby I'll be fine. You can stay in the car."

Erin suddenly looked very stubborn. "I don't want to stay in the car. I want to go with you. Now I'm going and you can't stop me."

Chuckling, the blonde opened her door. "Are you 31 or 13?"

"Just for that comment you have to buy me a bag of Doritos when we get to Shell."

Nearly halfway to San Francisco, the couple agreed to stop at a motel a couple hours after the sun had set. They would get an early start in the morning and hopefully make it to Erin's home by noon.

Since all of the double occupancy rooms were taken, they purchased a room with a king-sized bed. They could have had a cot delivered to the room, but decided that they were both grownups who were capable of sharing a bed. After all, they had done it once and that time they had both been naked. This time they silently vowed to wear pajamas. Having stopped at a restaurant an hour before reaching the motel neither was hungry, so after taking turns in the bathroom for showers, they climbed into the bed.

Turning on the television, they found a five-year-old movie, which both had seen before. Thirty minutes into it Court fell asleep with her head resting against the headboard. That looked mighty uncomfortable to Erin so carefully getting to her knees in the bed, she gently moved the small woman until she was stretched out with her head now on the pillow. Pulling the covers around her, she watched Court for a few moments as she slept.

Reaching out, she caressed her soft cheek before kissing it. "Goodnight Mrs. Tucker."

Developing an excruciating headache during the last forty miles of their trek, Court relinquished her keys to Erin and tried to relax in the passenger seat after having taken a Percocet. By the time they pulled into a parking space at Erin's apartment complex, the medication had eased the pain somewhat, yet she still didn't feel too well. Worried though Court assured her not to be, she led the woman up to the third level where her apartment was. Having two bedrooms, she put her in the guestroom.

Lying down, Court immediately closed her eyes. "I just need to rest for a little while baby," she softly uttered. "I'll be okay in a while." When Erin asked if there was anything she could get for her, she shook her head no. "Just rest."

She had fallen asleep by the time Erin quietly closed the door.

Opening the bedroom door to check on her wife for the tenth time in four hours, the first thing Erin noticed was a pair of amused green eyes looking toward her. In addition to the look, she was relieved to see the smile on those lips.

"Hey you. You're awake, huh?" The brunette pushed the door open all the way and walked inside where she sat on the edge of the queen-sized bed.

Nodding, Court covered her mouth as she emitted the cutest yawn Erin had ever heard. She never realized that a yawn could be cute until then. "I've been lying here awake for a few minutes wondering what you were up to."

Barely noticing what she was doing, Erin brushed soft blonde bangs away from Court's eyes. "You could have come out to look you know."

A grin resulted. "Call me lazy."

"Okay lazy. What do you want for dinner?"

The grin increased. "Yum, food. I'll have whatever sounds good to you."

"You feel like going out? I got an invitation to a spontaneous ultra casual dinner at a Mexican restaurant in the Castro tonight." Earlier, her best friend Vicki had called her cell phone while she had been unpacking to ask how the wedding had gone. Erin hadn't told her the full story over the phone, but did let her know that she was back in town early because she and Michelle had broken up. Vicki couldn't even pretend to be upset that their relationship had ended. She was never a fan of Michelle. When Vicki invited her to dinner, Erin asked if she could bring a friend. Ever the intuitive one, Vicki knew that this wasn't an average run of the mill 'friend' but she refrained from asking on the phone. It could wait until tonight.

"It wouldn't be an imposition?"

"Of course not silly." Erin beamed. "You *are* my wife." Funny how mentioning that little fact easily rolled off her tongue. *I like the sound of that.*

"Then I'm in."

Arriving at the restaurant called Tacky Taco (silly name though there was nothing tacky about the food) Erin and Court were headed toward the entrance when the taller of the two spied a familiar redhead bundled in a thick tan jacket standing in front of the door leading into the restaurant. A bright smile lit up her face as she caught sight of them, starting to wave as she hurried to meet the pair. When she arrived Erin asked her why she was waiting for them outside when it had to be much warmer inside Tacky Taco.

Curious though friendly gray eyes made a quick observation of Court before focusing on Erin. She was about to answer when out of the corner of an ever inspecting eye she noticed a glint of gold as Court secured some of her hair behind an ear. Managing to keep her mouth from falling open, she then observed that Erin was wearing an identical simple gold band. Well actually the rings weren't truly gold, but gold-plated brass; however that wasn't the point. The point was that

her best friend had traveled to Las Vegas for a wedding yet had...

"You got married?!" Vicki said this loud enough for others walking through the parking lot to hear. A couple people smiled in their direction and one even clapped as they yelled congratulations. Looking truly hurt, she didn't wait for a confirmation. "I can't believe this. You got married without me?" She smacked Erin on the arm none too gently. "I've been your best friend for eight years and you tied the knot without me. You were my Maid of Honor and then you elope on me? What gives?" Finally shutting up she waited for an answer as she impatiently tapped a foot on the pavement.

Sparing her wife a frown for chuckling (albeit softly), Erin quickly thought of how to answer. "I um...it's complicated Vicki. Why don't we go inside and get seated first." The redhead disagreed. She wanted to discuss this in the parking lot in weather so cold that Erin half expected her fingers to freeze and fall off if they stood there much longer. "Why here?" She became suspicious. "What's your reason for not wanting to talk inside the restaurant?"

"Never you mind that. Just tell me what happened."

The brunette sighed. She was too cold to argue. "Fine. Yes, I got married, which you might have guessed is the reason Michelle and I broke up. I'm sorry I didn't include you. It was a spur of the moment decision." Wrapping an arm around her wife's shoulders she continued, "As corny as it sounds the moment I first saw Court at a nightclub Friday night I knew that she was the woman for me. I never believed that love at first sight was possible until then. Before the night was over we were married. The next day Michelle found out about it before I could tell her and dumped me. I even lost my job." Looking at Court she tenderly smiled and kissed the top of her blonde peach scented head. "I don't care thought because she's worth it. I love this little angel so much already that it's frightening." She sounded so earnest that for a second Court foolishly hoped that she meant it.

Vicki glanced between them as she processed this unexpected information. In eight years of friendship she had never know Erin to be so impulsive. Looking at the positive, she was gladdened that her friend hadn't married that annoying and spoiled Michelle Braddock who seemed content to mooch off of her father instead of behaving like a responsible goal-oriented adult. However, she wasn't thoroughly convinced that Erin and Court were deliriously in love with each other. Something was amiss here. She just couldn't put her finger on it...yet. In the meantime she could be supportive.

Her smile returning, Vicki slowly nodded. "So you finally fell in love?"

Erin squeezed the smaller woman pressed against her. "Yes. I had no idea love could feel this amazing."

Thinking about the wonderful person waiting inside for them, Vicki nodded in agreement. "Keisha caused me to say something similar to that twelve years ago." Reaching out, she wrapped her arms around Erin who in turn did the same. "Congratulations to you sweetheart. If you're happy then so am I."

"Thanks so much Vicki."

As the hug ended, the redhead turned to Court, raising an eyebrow. "Does Court speak? I already know she chuckles."

Court chose that moment to chuckle again as she stuck out a hand to be shook. "She does and she thinks it's nice to meet you Vicki."

"Likewise Court." Smiling at her, she turned that handshake into an embrace. Usually, it didn't take Vicki long to assess whether she liked a person or not. For instance, the first time she met Michelle she knew within three minutes that she would never care for the brat. However, so far so good with the adorable blonde. Though Vicki had a strong feeling that she or both of them were hiding something, it was already obvious that Court was nothing like Michelle. She instinctively liked her.

"It's rather chilly out here. Ladies, should we go in?" Vicki asked while shoving her hands into two of the five hundred pockets sewn onto her jacket.

Erin smirked, indicating herself and Court. "We've been trying to do that since we arrived. You held us hostage out here. If I had them, I'd be freezing my nuts off."

Rolling her eyes, the redhead turned toward Tacky Taco's entrance. "Such a drama queen!"

Upon reaching their table, Erin discovered the reason why Vicki had been so urgent to speak with her outside. Originally their dinner date was only supposed to consist of her, Court, Vicki and her longtime partner Keisha. However, Vicki had seen fit to call their closest friends in order to invite them after learning that Erin had broken up with Michelle in Las Vegas and was bringing along a 'friend' to dinner. Of course she wanted to be the first to find out what was going on, so she asked them to arrive at the restaurant before the time Erin was supposed to and then waited outside in order to grab her friend before she could enter.

What a tricky redhead that Vicki was. She could probably teach Lucy Ricardo a few things.

Not minding since she had already figured that Court would have to meet the girls sooner or later, Erin made the introductions after answering a dozen questions about the wedding she didn't remember much of. Between she and Court, they felt that they did an okay job of convincing her friends that this marriage was supposed to happen because they were so deeply in love.

The girls included Dr. Victoria (Vicki please) Lange and her wife Dr. Keisha Douglass. Though they had been together for a dozen years, they had only been legally married a little over a year since the laws on gay marriages surprisingly changed during the spring of 2002. Though some states were still opposed to the idea of same-sex couples being legally wed, luckily California had been one of the first to make the giant leap.

Although Keisha and Vicki were both doctors, they were in very different fields. Dr. Lange was a neurosurgeon whereas Dr. Douglass a veterinarian. For some peculiar reason people were often shocked to learn that Vicki's chosen profession involved working on the human brain. She had lost count how many times she had been told by others that they couldn't picture her as a doctor, much less a brain doctor. Somehow that was a bit insulting. On the other hand, there was those who were simply shocked because wasn't she too young to be a neurosurgeon? Somehow that was a bit uplifting.

They were the only two in the group to have a child. Tyrell who was fifteen years old, was actually Keisha's son from a one year long marriage, yet Vicki thought of him as her own because she had been in his life since he was a toddler. Tyrell considered himself a lucky guy. He had two mothers and a dad who showered him with love and all three got along well with each other. He couldn't possibly ask for more.

The next oldest in the group after Keisha and Vicki was Adriana Enriquez, the 34-year old owner of a popular bookstore located in the Castro district where she resided. Unlike them she was single and though she wouldn't have minded becoming an item with someone, she wasn't actively searching for a girlfriend. Having spent five years in a relationship that abruptly went down the drain last year she was still a little uneasy about seriously dating anyone. Friends had set her up on a few dates but she hadn't felt a connection with anyone.

A couple years older than Erin, Lindsay Stansfield used to be a truck driver delivering goods to other cities and states. However, after years of spending a great deal of her life away from home she grew tired of the job she initially enjoyed. Getting the opportunity to travel across the United States had been exciting until the loneliness started to seep in, so nearly two years ago she retired from truck driving and her CB handle Sexy Stud and applied for a position as a UPS worker. Having more time to spend with her family, friends and newly acquired girlfriend, excellent benefits and normal hours, Lindsay was proud to refer to herself as a member of the UPS team.

The youngest of the group, Toni Thorpe was a single secretary and loved every single moment of it. At least the single part. She wasn't thrilled about being a secretary, especially since she thought her boss to a sexual harassing jerk, but it was paying the bills until she could get another job. If one asked Toni her hobby, she could say job hunting. Every five or six months she started a new job in a field entirely different from the last. She was never fired--well okay there was that one time--she just got bored. This time Toni was bored *and* irritated by a man who liked to compliment her on her fabulous bazooms. He actually said bazooms. Jerk.

"Court where are you from? San Francisco?" Adriana asked, slapping Toni's hand away from her plate. She had given her one forkful of her chile verde while informing her that it would be the only sample and she hadn't been kidding. If the secretary wanted chile verde she should have ordered it instead of a taco salad.

Court finished swallowing before she replied. "No, though I love this city. San Francisco is one of my favorite places to be. There's so much diversity--it's incredible. I'm a Massachusetts Native."

"But you'll be movin' here now since ya'll are married right?" Lindsay questioned, showing a trace of the southern accent that she had never fully gotten rid of. Originally from Texas, she had moved to San Francisco shortly after her 21st birthday. She had zero problems with her accent though. Over the years during her travels on the road it had wooed many a woman and Lindsay wasn't ashamed to admit that she had used it along with ingrained southern charm to her advantage.

Nodding, the blonde smiled at her. "Yes, I will, which will be easy since I haven't lived in Massachusetts or any particular place in a year." Five curious faces focusing on her, Court thought she should explain. She gave them the same cliff notes she had Erin. After doing so she was asked a multitude of questions about her travels throughout the states and to other countries. The ex-lawyer patiently and even giddily answered all of them in between bites of Combo #4.

By the end of dinner it was safe to assume that the girls approved of Erin's new wife. Having never made that many friends so quickly, Court had immensely enjoyed the evening spent in the company of these women and was excited over the prospect of further getting to know them during the next few months. After a hearty round of hugs shared outside of Tacky Taco, she and Erin headed toward the brunette's black Infiniti.

"They can be a handful," Erin stated with a grin. "I hope they didn't wear you out with all those questions." A couple of times she had attempted to stop her friends from acting like Court was on the witness stand only to have her wife assure her that she enjoyed the inquiries concerning her year of travel.

Settling into the passenger seat, Court beamed. "No, I loved it. I love your friends. They're awesome. That Lin is a Southern cutie with those deep dimples, that accent and the flirtatious behavior. Cracks me up."

Readily agreeing, Erin told herself that she wasn't jealous by the opinion *her* wife made about the UPS worker. Nope, didn't bother her one bit that *her* wife thought another woman was a cutie. No big deal. They were only going to be married for a few months. This was business; therefore she had no emotions one way or the other.

Erin pulled out of the parking lot and headed home. Turning on the radio she was instantly met with the voices of the Dixie Chicks singing a country song.

Country...southern.

Quickly turning the channel she settled on one that played nothing but jazz music.

Sexy Stud. Oh, yeah that's soooo cute.

After taking a shower and slipping into a pair of loose-fit chinos and a white T-shirt, Court

walked into the living room immediately stopping as her eyes fell on the long form dressed in spandex dancing to the Pointer Sisters song *I'm So Excited*. Court was getting excited just watching her wife's sometimes provocative moves across the floor. Erin had moved the coffee table in order to give herself more room.

Unnoticed since Erin was so engrossed in her aerobic exercise, Court quietly observed her through the next three energetic songs coming from the stereo system. Just as the music ended, Erin grabbed a towel from the arm of the couch, dabbing at the sweat on her face and the back of her neck. Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, she turned toward the blonde woman starting to smile when she noticed Court's.

"Good morning. Been watching me?" Tossing the towel on the floor Erin joined it there and began doing some light stretches--her cool down period.

Momentarily distracted as her wife pulling her arms high above her head caused her already generous breasts to further protrude in the tank top she wore, Court failed to answer right away. In fact, she almost forgot the question. "Um, yes. A few minutes." Showing just how flexible she could be, Erin held one leg in the air causing it to be at a ninety-degree angle with its mate. *Good gracious, what nice limbs she has. Better to wrap around my body with.* "Do you do this everyday?"

The brunette switched legs. "I alternate in order to avoid repetition. If your body does the same thing everyday, it can get used to it and you don't want that happening. All of my activities last about an hour. Mondays I do a combination of high and low impact dance aerobics. Wednesdays I try some kickboxing aerobics. On Fridays I do yoga and Tuesdays and Thursdays I run around my neighborhood 3-4 miles, or sometimes I go to the park." Erin moved into a sitting position and with her legs spread-eagled she leaned forward to touch her toes. "I usually take the weekend off." An idea occurred to her. "You care to join me? Do you work out?"

It was on the tip of Court's tongue to say yes, but she knew that would be a lie. The last time she had truly worked out was during her physical education classes in high school. "Ah, no. I mean during my travels I walked a lot to explore and whatnot, but I wouldn't call it exercising. I *would* like to join you if you don't mind."

Erin indulgently smiled. "If I minded I wouldn't have asked you now would I?"

"You have a point there."

Picking up her towel, Erin stood. "We can start in the morning then." As she walked by the older woman, she snapped at her bottom with the towel. Protecting her rear end with her hands, Court let out a surprised gasp followed by a laugh. "I need to jump in the shower now and then we can raid the kitchen for breakfast. I might have some Cheerios."

Court covertly watched the spandex covered tush disappear from view and softly sighed. *I need to jump in the shower again too. Except this time around I only require the cold water.*

It turned out that she didn't have Cheerios so Erin made them two bowls of instant oatmeal and strawberry jelly laved toast instead. While they ate she looked through the employment section of the newspaper, occasionally circling job opportunities that caught her eye. Leaning across the small breakfast table, Court read one of the circled ads.

"Is that what you used to do for Mr. Braddock?"

"Yep. I was a mortgage account executive at Braddock Finance." She didn't sound too enthusiastic about it.

"And that's what you want to continue doing?"

Erin shrugged. "It's what I studied to do so I suppose."

"But is it what you *want* to do again?"

Folding the newspaper, Erin then swallowed the rest of her coffee. "How many people do you think love their job?"

"Let's see..." Court appeared thoughtful. Raising her hand she started to count off names on her fingers. "When I was a lawyer I loved it. Sure at times it was grueling stressful work and there were times when I was lucky to get four hours of rest, but I was passionate about my career choice. And I just met your friends last night but it seems that all of them minus Toni enjoy what they do. So, Vicki, Keisha, Adriana, Lindsay, and I love our jobs. That's five right there." Court smiled. "And I'm willing to bet that there are a lot more who do as well."

Erin smirked. "Just had to prove me wrong didn't you squirt?"

Grinning, Court leaned back in her chair. "Absolutely. It's what I live for baby."

The brunette was about to respond when her phone started ringing. Excusing herself from the table, she hurried into the living room to pick up the cordless from its receiver. "Hello?" She winced in sympathy for herself when she discovered who it was. "Hi Mom. How are you doing?"

"Not so good right now," the older woman responded, sounding quite miffed. "My youngest daughter just broke my heart in two."

Erin rolled her eyes. And Vicki had called *her* a drama queen. "Mom how did I go about doing that?"

"Years ago when you told us that you were a lesbian, after the initial shock your father and I were willing to accept it because we loved you and wanted you to be happy. So we've been waiting for you to find the perfect woman and now we hear that you have and you married her." Brief pause as Mrs. Tucker inhaled deeply. "You married her! Without your family! I had to hear

from someone other than my own daughter that she eloped in Las Vegas of all places! What were you thinking?"

Due to her mother's shouting, Erin had to wait for her ears to cease ringing before she replied. "I...Mom it's a long story." How had she found out? The only people who knew were the girls (they weren't gossips) and Michelle. Erin's eyes narrowed. Michelle. Had she caused her to lose her job *and* blabbed her marriage to her mother? *Damn, when she wants to make someone pay, she means business!*

"I'm retired so I have plenty of time."

Erin sighed. "Who told you about my wedding anyway? Michelle?"

"No and at least I'm thankful that you didn't marry *her!* I might have had to disown you then!" She had never hid the fact that she disapproved of her daughter's now ex-girlfriend. "Maggie called me first thing this morning and I've been sitting here for the past hour simmering over the news."

Maggie Thorpe was Toni's mother. She and Alice Tucker were akin to two peas in a pod ever since they became bridge partners a few years back. So had her middle child filled Maggie in on the news of Erin's marriage? She must have. *Thanks a lot Toni.* True, Erin had never informed her friends that her marriage to Court was a secret, but why did Toni have to tell her mother whose mouth was notorious for running like a refrigerator?

"You can tell me about all it tonight. You and Courtney are coming over for dinner," Alice's tone was resolute.

"Now is not a good time. I have to look for a new job."

"Yes, I heard about that too. I never liked that whole Braddock family so they don't deserve to have you as an employee. It's their loss. You can work for your father's mortgage company now."

Erin plopped down on the couch with an inward groan. She had lost count how many times her parents had attempted to woo her into the Tucker family business. She had followed in her father's footsteps, although being a mortgage broker wasn't her first choice so shouldn't that be enough? Steven Tucker was her father and that was all Erin wanted him to be. The last thing she wanted was to report to him on a daily basis. It would drive her crazy.

"No, Mom. I found some companies that are hiring and I need to check them out today."

Alice dramatically sighed. "Don't work for your father then. You're just breaking hearts right and left."

Her daughter groaned into the receiver. And this day had started out with so much promise...
"Mom--"

"You don't job hunt at night time, therefore I want you and your partner here at 6 o'clock. I'm making your favorite--pot roast."

Before Erin had a chance to say anything else, the phone went dead. "Goodbye to you too Mom." Replacing the phone, she walked back into the kitchen to find Court drying the dishes and putting them away. Sitting down she filled her in on the phone call and their forced invitation. Based on her laughter, Court obviously thought that funny. "Eer, Court my mother isn't the easiest woman to get along with."

The blonde smiled as she laid the dishtowel on the counter to dry. "Somehow I'll manage. I'm sure it will be fine."

"Your optimism is sweet. Not accurate but sweet."

Since her wife hesitated to ring the doorbell Court did it for her. A gentle smile on her lips, she patted the taller woman on her back while reminding her for the tenth time that the dinner with her parents would go well. Though Erin wanted to believe that, she wasn't so sure. Court was still smiling when Alice opened the door. Stunning in her late fifties, Alice was almost as tall as her daughter, but that was as far as the similarities went. Court wondered if her wife could have been adopted until she spotted the dark-haired, blue-eyed man walking toward the door. *Put a wig on him and...nah, he would look silly. Plus, they don't look that much alike.*

"Erin," Alice said in greeting as she walked forward to kiss her daughter's cheek. Turning to the smaller of the two, she smiled much to Erin's relief. She hadn't known how her mother would behave. "And Courtney. It's lovely to meet you dear." She deposited a kiss on her cheek as well before moving aside to let her husband speak. Instead of kissing he hugged them both.

Court didn't know what her wife was so worried about. This would be a piece of cake.

Usually when a person stated that something would be a piece of cake, just those few words seemed to put a curse on whatever they were referring to. However, Court was correct in her assumption on how the evening would turn out. Erin was completely baffled as she watched the interaction between Court and her parents while they sat at the dining room table. She had been expecting a lecture and/or her mother to behave like she had on the phone that morning, but Alice was actually being friendly...warm even.

It occurred to her that Court was the reason why. She was acting in such a courteous and friendly manner that Alice and Steven couldn't help but to return it. It was never like this when Erin brought Michelle home or they all met for dinner. Though her parents appeared hospitable on those occasions, she knew that it was all a façade because they much like her friends couldn't stand Michelle. They were different with their new daughter-in-law. They were genuine. *Just*

when I think I have them all figured out they show me how pleasant they can be.

Her mother was laughing harder than she'd ever witnessed before. Tears leaked from her eyes and she wiped at them with her cloth dinner napkin as Court regaled them with a humorous story from her trip in Italy.

"So I'm walking around in serious need of a bathroom when I come upon this little café. Thinking that there might be one in there, I head inside with my translation book in hand ready to ask someone where the bathroom is. Leafing through it I find the words I need and then hurry over to a man wearing an apron. I figured he must have worked there so he should know. I translated what I wanted into Italian while giving him such a desperate look.

He looks back at me curiously for moment and I'm about to repeat when he starts to grin knowingly. Thinking that we're on the same page I follow when he beckons. He leads me to the second level, which I find out isn't another area of the café but a one-room apartment. I'm thinking maybe this is where he lives and he's the owner of the café.

After opening the door he allows me to pass through first. For just a second I hesitate before walking inside. He was only trying to be helpful and he looked harmless enough. I would quickly use the bathroom and then get out. He closes the door, says something to me in Italian but I'm no longer paying much attention since my eyes are on the toilet I see through a partially open door. In my current state it was like discovering a treasure chest filled with gold bars and diamonds.

I smiled at the restaurant owner and sprinted into the bathroom. Done in less than two minutes, I opened the door to find him lounging on his bed wearing underwear that might be too tight for a Ken doll. All of a sudden a light bulb went off in my head. Down in the café I had meant to ask him 'where is your bathroom', which translated is something like 'dove é la vostra stanza da bagno'. What I really said was 'dove é la vostra camera da letto'. That is 'where is your bedroom'. Basically, he thought that this American woman was propositioning him." Alice and Steven howled with laughter.

"What did you do?" Steven inquired.

"I was about to try to look up 'I only wanted to use your bathroom' when the front door opened. Closing my small translation book, I watched as a tall robust woman walked into the apartment, her angry eyes taking in the restaurant worker's state of dress and then zoning in on me." Court glanced toward her wife who was watching her intently. "Erin she was taller than you. This woman could have easily kissed Shaq on the cheek without standing on tiptoe!" Everyone chuckled at that, including the storyteller.

"So she begins speaking furiously in Italian while he hurries off the bed and puts his clothes back on. Occasionally he offered replies in a soft voice, probably trying to explain why I was in his bedroom and he was practically naked. Meanwhile, I continued standing in the entrance to the bathroom not sure what to do. I wanted to get out of there but I was frozen, afraid to walk past her. He didn't like he could do much harm, but I wasn't sure I could take her. She might have wiped the floor with me.

I was still contemplating what to do when she suddenly lunges in my direction. Luckily, my feet unglued themselves from the floor so that I could fly back into the bathroom and lock the door. It wasn't a very secure lock, so I figured she could break it down if she wanted to. She yelled at me through the door and I figured she was probably calling me every deplorable name she could think of. I couldn't really blame her for being upset because it did look suspicious.

She starts pulling on the doorknob, rattling the entire door as I search around the bathroom--for what I didn't know. And then I had an idea. I would climb out of the window above the toilet. It would be a tight fit since it was a small window, but I was willing to try. It was better than waiting for the incensed Amazon woman to come get me. So opening it, I balanced my feet on the edge of the toilet, however not well enough since my right foot slipped inside. The lower half of my pants leg and the inside of my shoe was drenched!" More raucous laughter. Alice was nearly doubled over in her chair with her arms wrapped around aching ribs.

"By this time it sounded like she was kicking the door. I could hear her boyfriend or her husband's voice--I imagine he was trying to get her to stop, but she wouldn't be deterred. Regaining my balance with a cold wet shoe, I pulled myself into the window. Since I was on the second floor I would have to be careful on the ledge. I was almost out when I heard footsteps and then someone grabbed my foot--the dry one. I let out a small scream as I scuffled to break loose, wiggling my foot back and forth. I think I ended up kicking her because she groaned and released her grasp. So I climbed the rest of the way out, but as I did so I accidentally dropped my translation book. Now I definitely couldn't have communicated with her.

I heard someone say ouch and chanced a look toward the ground where I saw a pret--ah, a young woman rubbing the top of her head as she glanced up quizzically. The small book had struck her on the head on its way down. I apologized and was relieved when she spoke back in perfect English, asking me what I was doing up there. I managed to tell her what happened before the Amazon pushed half of her body through the window--and then she was stuck, but her mouth wasn't. She continued shouting at me while waving an angry fist in the air.

I figured that my luck was starting to change when the woman standing below offered to translate my explanation for me. It turns out that she spoke perfect Italian although I later found out that she was from Arizona. It took about ten minutes to convince the other woman that I wasn't after her man but soon she understood that it was all a mistake. At least on my part anyway. He had still been willing to cheat on her so I don't know if she remained upset with him or not."

Leaning toward her while chuckling, Alice wrapped an arm around her shoulders, gently squeezing. "That was hilarious but you poor thing. I do hope the rest of your trip wasn't as stressful."

Court smiled thinking of young woman who had inadvertently rescued her. Yes, the next four days had been most delightful. However, she was smart enough to leave that part out. "I had an enjoyable trip after that Mrs. Tucker. No further mishaps ensued."

Alice rubbed her shoulder while smiling. "That's good. Speaking of trips," she glanced toward her daughter, "when are you going to take your honeymoon?"

Honeymoon? We're skipping ahead to the honeymoon? Erin thought. *When are you going to criticize me for not including you in our wedding?* Who was this person who looked exactly like her mother? She had been benevolent ever since they walked in the front door. Erin had been waiting for her to exclaim again that her heart had been broken, but the moment had yet to arrive and there wasn't any indication that it would.

"We actually haven't discussed our honeymoon Mom."

"Why not?"

"I need to look for a job first."

"If you just worked for your father that wouldn't be a problem."

Erin stabbed a string bean with more force than she needed to. Noticing her partner's sudden frustration, Court decided to divert her mother-in-law's attention.

"Mrs. Tucker this pot roast is heavenly," the blonde uttered while pointing at the tender meat on her plate. Although she had been in storytelling mode she had managed to eat the majority of it and intended to clean her plate. It really was tasty. "What's your secret?"

Alice basked in the praise. "Dry onion soup and please call me Mom dear. Or if you're not comfortable with that yet, then call me Alice."

"Alright. Let's start with Alice."

Court smiled as Erin tried to keep her mouth from falling on the plate. Call her Mom? She had yet to tell her son-in-law that he could refer to her as Mom and he had been married to Erin's sister for three years now and had been partially responsible for giving Alice a granddaughter to spoil. Erin glanced at her father to gauge his reaction. He looked pleased.

Oh, okay. She understood now. Erin nodded.

She had stepped into the Twilight Zone.

During the drive home Erin was extremely quiet. "Is something the matter baby? Should I not have told your parents that story? I thought they might have gotten a kick out of it."

Glancing toward her, Erin reassured the older woman with a smile that she wasn't upset with her. She wasn't upset at all actually. Just baffled by the evening, which she had no idea would turn out this well. Besides the part where her mother brought up the honeymoon, everything else had

gone off without a hitch.

"No, everything is fine Court. I was just thinking." After a pause she asked, "Did you enjoy yourself? I think my parents really like you."

"Yes, I did." The blonde grinned. "That doesn't surprise me."

Erin chuckled. "You are too modest."

"I know. I should really work on that."

Erin was reading a two-month old magazine in the lobby of Goldberg & Allan Loans when her cell phone began to vibrate in her pocket. Closing the magazine she answered it, talking in a low voice so as not to disturb anyone sitting near her. "Hello?"

"Hey baby."

Erin smiled because of the caller and the endearment, which she had grown to love hearing during the last week of their marriage. "Hey yourself. What are you up to?"

"Um, not much," Court cryptically responded. "Have you had your interview yet?"

"No, I'm still waiting." She glanced at her watch. "It shouldn't be long though."

"I'm positive that they would hire you."

"Really?" Those few words coming from her wife boosted Erin's confidence that this interview would go well. She had been so nervous that she barely slept a wink last night.

"Yes, really. Now come here."

Huh? "Come there?"

"Yes."

"Where?" Court gave her an address. "So you want me to come there after my interview?"

"No, I want you to come right now."

What? "But if I come now I'll miss my interview."

"Exactly."

Are you high? "You want me to miss my interview but you're positive that this firm will hire

me."

"Actually I said *would* hire you if you were going to interview with them, which I don't think you should do."

She must have been high. She must have taken more than the recommended dosage of her Percocet. "And why not?"

"Because you don't want to continue being a mortgage exec."

"I don't?" Even as she gave that response, Erin questioned if it was true. Deep down she knew the answer.

"No. You're sitting there because it's what you've been doing for years now. It's time for a change--change is good. I think you're just scared to do that, but Erin there's no reason to be. I'll help you. I'd like to help you right now. Meet me at that address, please." When she was greeted with silence she continued. "Trust me baby. Get up, walk out and come to me," her voice was soft, almost seductive and pulled her wife in like a magnet.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Erin pulled her car to a stop behind Court's RAV4. Though she had been in this area many times before, she had no idea why they were meeting there. Getting out of the car, she walked toward the crimson automobile ahead and peeked in the driver's side window where she spotted Court sleeping on the passenger side. Walking around the front of the car, she lightly tapped on the window, instantly waking the woman.

A smile slipping onto her face, the blonde opened the door and exited. Suppressing a yawn, she noted the time. "Ooh, here with two minutes to spare. Good job speed racer."

"Thanks." Erin tried to smile but she was preoccupied, observing her wife. Court looked weary and her eyes weren't as bright as usual. "Court are you feeling all right?"

Court touched the side of her head. "Small headache. I took Motrin before leaving the apartment. The Percocet makes me feel funny sometimes." She smiled broader yet it seemed strained. "It's better than it was. So you ready?"

"We can do this... whatever it is later." Erin realized that the older woman was her main concern right now. She wanted to get her home and in the bed where she could rest. Despite Court's nonchalant way of treating her headaches, Erin was growing more worried. This was the third migraine she had endured this week.

"No, absolutely not." Court shook her head as she closed the car door. "I'm fine and I'm really excited about what I have to show you. I've been working on this since Monday and if I wait any

longer, I'll surely explode." She grinned. "And you don't want bits and pieces of me laying around, do you?"

"Uh, no I'm kinda fond of having you all in one little piece."

Court's mock frown was the only indication she gave that she noticed the use of the word 'little' to describe her. "That's what I thought. So let's go." Slipping a hand into one of Erin's, she pulled the woman toward the glass double doors of a large two-story building. The pair walked into what was a small section of the building. Erin observed their surroundings with interest.

To her right was a curved maple finish reception counter with a flat screen computer and desk chair behind it. To the left was a glass coffee table (with magazines on top) partially surrounded by chairs--this must have been the waiting area. However, Erin didn't know what future occupants of those chairs would be waiting for. She asked but Court refused to tell her as she led her toward a set of swinging wooden doors. Pushing the left side open, Court allowed Erin to walk inside before following. She heard a soft gasp from her wife as she looked around the spacious studio and smiled as a result.

Filled with natural sunlight filtering through the many windows, it wasn't necessary to switch on the overhead lights. A mirror extended the entire length and width of the wall at the front of the studio while a ballet bar traveled the length of the back wall. Immediately to the left of the entrance was a large rack holding vinyl coated dumbbells ranging from five to twelve pounds in a variety of bright colors. Thirty exercise mats; each with their own Reebok Stepper was neatly arranged on a suspended shock absorbent floor.

Too shocked to speak, Erin noticed that her feet were moving as Court eagerly pulled her toward a door on the opposite side of the studio. She soon discovered that it led into a similar studio, except there were no mats, step systems, or dumbbells. Instead twenty Keiser Power Pacer exercise bikes greeted her. Erin knew that she had to say something. She just had to find out where her voice traipsed off to first.

Court excitedly bounced in place while wearing the biggest smile. "Well? Whatcha thinkin'?"

"Ah," Erin slowly shook her head as she wandered over to one of the stationary bicycles, running her palm along its seat. "Wow," she said, the word barely audible.

Court followed her. "Do you like it? I figure you've been teaching and getting me motivated to exercise all week, you should get paid for it. You did mention that you used to be an aerobics instructor during your college days, so why not take it up again with a fitness studio of your very own?"

Erin looked at her in amazement. "You bought me this building?" Her wife nodded. "And you bought everything in it and put it in here?"

"The equipment and furniture, yes." She grinned. "Big buff deliverymen put everything where I wanted it though."

"This is all so sweet of you Court..."

"I hear a but coming."

Erin sighed, her amazed eyes falling on the rows of new bicycles. "But I can't accept it. It's too much. You barely know me. This must have cost you close to a million dollars if not more."

"You're worth that and much much more. Erin please don't turn this down. I've worked so hard to buy and have it furnished within five days. Also I believe that this will be a job that you actually love getting up in the morning to come to. I've figured out that you're addicted to exercise--which it still boggles my mind that anyone could be," Court grinned, "so share with others. Teach them how to do it. I may be your wife yet I'm not biased when I say that you're an excellent instructor. So here." Court tossed her a set of keys. "Those belong to you."

Erin gazed toward the keys and then the ex-lawyer. She was tempted...so very tempted. Her brain was already coming up with possible names for her fitness center. But she couldn't accept this highly expensive gift no matter how much she secretly wanted to. It wouldn't be appropriate. She and Court didn't share a genuine loving marriage--it was going to be over by spring. Therefore, it was only right that Erin hand her the keys back.

"So I'm out of a job before I actually start it? That's a new record for me."

"Toni what are you doing here?" Erin asked, looking at the younger woman standing in the entrance to Studio B. "What job?"

"Well if you were to stop behaving like a stubborn ass I could be your new--okay, your first receptionist. I'm cheap too. Um, I mean my salary is cheap." She winked at her probable boss.

Last Friday my ex-girlfriend referred me to as a dumbass. This Friday one of my closest friends calls me a stubborn ass. It's a very good thing that I'm not overly sensitive! "Toni as much as I would love to help you out I don't think this is the way to go about it."

"I don't understand," Toni started, looking truly confused. "Court is your wife. She has the money and she wants to spend it on you so what's the big deal? If your significant other can't purchase you your very own aerobics studio then who can?"

"Thank you Toni!" Court appeared grateful for her input.

Erin smirked. "Yeah, thanks Toni."

"Are you going to take it? Because if you don't I'm just going to let it sit here. What a waste. All of this equipment will collect a bunch of dust."

"Since you hired Toni, I assume you're my business partner."

Court shook her head. "No, I'm permanently retired from all work. I bought it now you run it. I just thought that having a friend as the receptionist would be a bonus. And in case you're not into teaching spinning classes, I know someone who would jump at the opportunity to instruct those classes as well as a few others. You could pay her per class taught."

"Are you talking about Lindsay?" Though she enjoyed being a UPS worker, a few nights every week Lindsay taught various types of aerobics at a local gym where she was paid \$40 for every class. In the past she had mentioned that this was her 'mad money'.

"Yep. She actually assisted me with purchasing the equipment, because I wasn't sure what to buy. This week she and Toni have been a great help to me."

Erin couldn't recall the last time she saw Toni blush. She refused to think about her wife and Sexy Stud spending time together shopping. Lindsay was taken and even if she wasn't, it didn't make any difference.

Looking at the younger blonde in the room, Erin smiled. "Honey could I talk with Court privately for a moment?"

"Sure thing. I'll be checking out the new Dell!" Toni raced from the studio to play with the computer in the reception area.

"Court if I accept this, I don't want the million dollars you were going to give me in six months." The other woman was about to protest. "Even if you hadn't done this for me, I've been having reservations about that money. Court I consider you my friend now and I don't want to charge you for our marriage--even if it isn't a marriage built on love. Regardless, I doubt that I would have taken a million dollars from you."

Court was thoughtfully silent for a good fifteen seconds before she agreeably nodded and extended her hand toward her wife. "Okay, deal."

"Before I shake your hand one more thing."

Court kept her arm raised. "Yes?"

"Whatever income I make you get 50% of."

"That sounds like I would be your partner and I already stated that I was retired."

"You wouldn't have to do anything. Just collect your share."

"Nope. You have to pay Lindsay and Toni. You're not paying me too." Starting to feel silly, she lowered her arm.

"40%."

Court grinned. "Your ears must be plugged up, 'cause you ain't listen to me. I want 0% of yours, Lindsay's and anyone else who you might hire down the roads proceeds." Because Erin looked so distressed, the blonde sighed. She wanted her to be happy. "5% for the next six months. After that, I'm out."

"That's not very much. Could we go for a year?"

"We could go for six months. It's my final offer baby."

When Erin reluctantly nodded, a pleased Court again offered a hand to be shaken. Gently pushing it aside, the taller woman moved into her space for a tender hug. Surprised yet welcoming the affection, Court returned the hug just before a pair of lips kissed the ridge of her ear and whispered a thank you. She couldn't control a tiny shiver.

"I just thought about something," Erin started while releasing her petite wife. "What's upstairs?" I noticed that this was a two-story building."

Looping an arm through Erin's, she led her in the direction Toni had gone so that they could tell her the good news. She would call Lindsay in a bit. "Oh, that's where the men and women's locker rooms, bathrooms, and office are. I didn't have to purchase the lockers because they were already here. I just had them thoroughly cleaned. The previous owners taught ballet here." *Yep, the lockers were cleaned and I added steam rooms large enough to accommodate up to ten people in the locker rooms, but I won't reveal that at this time.*

Mostly empty cartons that used to be filled with piping hot Chinese eats, lay open on the coffee table surrounded by a group of stuffed women who were in the midst of discussing the opening of Erin's fitness center on Monday. It had been two weeks since Erin discovered the awesome gift that her wife had purchased for her and she had yet to decide on a name, so that was the current subject.

Taking a small sip from it, Keisha set her glass of white wine on the table. "I have an idea," she said, her brown eyes connecting with every face in the room. "We should each write down a name we like and then toss it in," she searched the coffee table, picking up one of the white boxes that had contained fried wontons, "this. Then Erin you randomly select names until you've pulled them all out. If you find one you like the most, then it's yours. Only after you're done, do we reveal who came up with what name."

Everyone including Erin agreed to this. After she found enough pens and a notepad in her kitchen drawer, she tore off a sheet for each of her friends and her wife. It took them five minutes to finish, fold the small sheets and insert them into the carton. Reaching into it, Erin selected the first suggestion, chuckling as she read the words.

"Ms. T's Fitness." She glanced at her friends. "Is this a play on Mr. T?"

"You can say you pity the fool who can't complete fifty pushups in two minutes," Lindsay offered while grinning.

"And to make it even more effective, you can wear five pounds of jewelry and shave your hair off until you're sporting a Mohawk," Adriana added, rousing a few laughs. "I bet you'd look rather cute."

"Sure babe. I'll run to the beauty salon first thing in the morning to get that done." Erin grabbed another slip of paper. "Ooh, Sweat Factory. I kind of like the sound of that." Placing it on the table, she picked another and burst out laughing. "This is a hip and humorous one. Funk Station."

"Now is that funk as in come to the Funk Station to get down, shake your groove thang or funk as in you shouldn't leave here smelling like a rose unless you partook of the showers?" Vicki amusingly inquired while rapidly twirling a chopstick between her fingers.

"Hmm, good question. I think it might be a little bit of both. Either way I like it. It sounds so cool." Erin laid it next to Sweat Factory and reached into the wonton box again. "Work It Out. That reminds of that song by Beyonce. What a sexy song!"

"Oh, yes." Vicki nodded in agreement. "And what a sexy lady!" That comment earned her a look from her wife. "But nowhere near as sexy as you sweetie."

Smiling, Keisha kissed her. "Nice save."

While they continued to 'make up' with a few more kisses, Erin read the remaining names. Pumped and Shape Up, both of which she liked. However, her favorites were Sweat Factory and Funk Station. Since she had a difficult time deciding, she insisted that they take a vote. The name that obtained the majority of six votes would be the winner.

Vicki voted first. "I choose Funk Station."

Her wife went next. "Well I choose Sweat Factory."

"Funk Station has my vote," Adriana said.

Toni nodded. "Has mine too."

"They're both great, but my vote goes to Sweat Factory," Court answered.

Lindsay swallowed the last bit of a fortune cookie. "Ditto."

So each name had three votes making it a tie. Suggesting that they flip a coin, Toni pulled a quarter from her pocket. If heads came up they would go with Funk Station. If tails, Sweat Factory. Flipping the quarter high into the air, Toni caught and slapped it onto the back of her left hand. "It's heads so Erin the name of your fitness center will be Funk Station."

Leaning toward her, Lindsay managed to check out the quarter before the younger woman palmed it. "Toni, that looks like tails to me." She raised a brow. "Funk Station was yours wasn't it? Tsk tsk. Cheatin' is so very wrong."

Toni attempted to look innocent, yet not one of the other women fell for it. "Oh! Silly me, I thought it was heads. I must need glasses. In that case, Sweat Factory wins."

"So who do I give thanks to for such a great name?" Erin asked, brightly smiling when Keisha raised her arm. "Good going Doc. Thank you very much."

"You're very welcome."

After revealing the creators of the remaining names, the group decided that it was time for dessert. Going to the kitchen for the two pies they brought, Keisha and Vicki began to cut everyone a slice while coffee finished brewing. No longer being able to ignore the dull ache in her head, Court thought it best to retire for the evening. Bidding everyone a goodnight and letting them know that she enjoyed their company as usual, she kissed her wife's cheek before heading out of the living room.

"Vicki could you do me a favor and check Court out? She's been having these migraines that sometimes last hours."

The blonde being spoken of made a u-turn. "No, that isn't necessary. I'm fine. I don't need to be checked out because I already know what my ailment is--migraines. They're really not that bad and I have medication that helps."

"Come to the hospital at 10 a.m. on Monday," Vicki said, ignoring her argument. "We'll see what's going on."

Court hoped that she didn't look like someone who was panicking. "But Erin starts teaching her classes on Monday."

"Are you an aerobics instructor?"

"No."

The neurosurgeon flashed her a smile. "Then you don't need to be there."

"And I can be there for your appointment. My last class is over by 9:30." Rising from the couch, Erin walked over to her wife, gently taking of her hands in her own. "Court please go see Vicki. If not for yourself then to ease my worrying. I hate it when you're in pain and I want you to feel better. She could help you."

Those imploring blue eyes kept her from arguing any further. "Okay. I'll go," Court quietly replied. Being pulled against Erin's warm body for a hug and a kiss on the top of her head was worth going to the doctor for. *Now I just have to find a way to keep her out of the examination*

room.

"Yes, she took me in early so there's no reason for you to come over," Court spoke into the cell phone while standing in the small garden belonging to the hospital. "That's right. Just migraines and she gave me a new medication for it. She said it would be more beneficial than the Percocet." Listening to the reply she laughed. "Actually I can't make out what the prescription says. You know doctors and their handwriting! Vicki told me what it was but I've forgotten that quickly. Must be because of my old age." Court leaned against a tree. "Aw, thanks for saying. How about I meet you for brunch? My treat. Great. Hey, before I hang up how did your first classes go?" She smiled, detecting the other woman's enthusiasm. "That's great baby. I told you they'd like you." Court glanced at her watch. "Well, I should get going. I want to get this prescription filled and then we can meet...well where would you like to eat? Okay, that's perfect. See you at say 11:30? Awesome. Bye for now baby."

Ending the call, Court put the phone in her pocket. She felt guilty about lying to Erin, but told herself that it was for the best. Her appointment with Vicki hadn't happened yet. She just didn't want Erin to be there and risk her finding out things that Court rather she weren't privy to.

Within ten minutes she was seated on an examination table covered with thin white paper that crinkled every time she moved. Walking into the room, Vicki greeted her as she pushed a wheeled stool toward the table and sat down.

"So how are you this morning?" She asked, looking up from the short stool.

"Pretty good and yourself Dr. Lange?" Court grinned as the other woman playfully rolled her eyes.

"Good and you don't have to call me that unless you want to."

"I like it."

"Then by all means do what you like." Vicki winked at her. "Okay, so tell me about these migraines. How long have you been having them?"

"Um, if Erin calls you could you tell her that I had my appointment before 10? I talked with her not too long ago and informed her that you took me in early."

The doctor looked puzzled. "And why did you do that?"

"So she wouldn't come here. I don't want her to be here and learn what I'm about to reveal to you."

Vicki studied her quietly for a moment. "We're talking about more than migraines aren't we?"

"Come on lady, we're almost there. You're doing good," Erin stated in an encouraging tone of voice as her feet pounded on the pavement. They were on their way to Tacky Taco after having received an invitation from Vicki last night to meet there. Though they had driven most of the way, Erin parked about two miles from the restaurant so that they could jog the rest of the way. Court had tried to use the excuse that they would get sweaty but Erin would have none of it. It was Thursday, one of two days that she taught a class during the afternoon, so one would think her hour-long 4 o'clock kickboxing class would have worn her out, but the brunette seemingly had an endless supply of energy. Sometime this week it had occurred to Court that her wife was the human equivalent of the Energizer Bunny. She just kept going and going no matter what.

Trying to rhythmically breathe like Erin had taught her to, Court kept up with her, though her legs were longer. "Can we...we walk the rest of the way?"

"No, but we can walk on the journey back to the car. Just a few more blocks. You can do it." She grinned. "Work it out!"

Court smirked. "Oh, sure. You didn't...pick my...name, but you use it...now?"

"Yup. And I might use it again in class."

Court wasn't able to offer a reply as a car pulled close to the curb. The drivers' side window lowering, a familiar face watched them in curiosity. "Did you guys get a flat on your way to Tacky Taco?" Adriana inquired, moving her car at a snail's pace while her friends continued to jog.

"No," Court responded, pointing an accusing finger at the tall woman next to her. "The sadist is...making us...run there."

"See you and your sadist wife in a little bit then." Laughing, Adriana pressed on the gas pedal and sped down the street.

Walking into Tacky Taco, Court and Erin went into the women's bathroom to wash their faces before joining their friends at the usual table. Keisha was the only person absent since Vicki wanted to discuss her surprise turning the big 4-0-birthday party.

"Enjoy your run?" Toni asked them. The first thing out of Adriana's mouth was that she had seen the newlywed couple jogging to the restaurant. "You didn't jog all the way from Nob Hill, did you?"

"No way." Court picked up a frigid glass containing water and crushed ice. "I would have collapsed miles ago if we'd tried that." She swallowed half the glass in one gulp.

"How are your migraines Court?" Vicki questioned. She hadn't seen nor spoken with Court since her appointment on Monday. Part of the reason was that she had no idea what to say to her and she didn't trust herself to say the wrong thing in front of Erin.

The ex-lawyer offered her a smile though she felt the slight tension between them. "They've improved. The Lidocaine you prescribed for me truly does help. Thank you again."

It didn't go unnoticed by Court that the redhead barely returned her smile. "You're welcome. You're not experiencing any symptoms such as nausea, blurred vision or dizziness?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Thank you for taking such good care of my girl," Erin told the doctor as she rubbed the length of her blushing wife's back.

Vicki smiled at her. "I did my best. Now should we order before delving into the main topic?"

"You bet. I for one am starved." Toni had already decided what she wanted. She was going to order the chile verde that she only obtained one bite of from Adriana's plate the last time they were there.

After their waiter headed to the kitchen to put their orders in, the group started to talk about the birthday party, which would take place next Saturday although Keisha's birthday was the following day. Having far in advance purchased tickets to a popular play that Keisha had been interested in going to, Vicki intended to take her wife to see it while everyone who was invited gathered at their house. Until they arrived Tyrell along with his aunt's assistance was the host. His aunt was Keisha's older sister Tamara who would be flying in from New York the day before the party. Both Douglass girls had been leading such busy lives that it would be nearly a year since they last saw one another. Vicki knew that having her sister there and for a whole week would be the best present.

"Look who's here," Adriana started, her eyes settling on someone standing at the bar. Everyone at the table looked toward the bar just in time to make eye contact. Pasting a smile on her face, she grabbed the six-foot tall woman next to her and headed in their direction. Simultaneously, a few of them groaned.

"That Popsicle stick she's pullin' over here must be the new girlfriend," Lindsay commented.

"Now we know for sure that she likes them tall." Vicki winked at her best friend. "But you're no Popsicle stick, doll.

"Thanks...I think."

"Well, well, well," Michelle smiled at them insincerely. She had never liked these women because in the four months she and Erin were together, they never accepted her into their clique. Not that she would have wanted to join--she just wanted to be asked. No one gave Michelle

Braddock the cold shoulder. No one. "If it isn't the rainbow connection. How are you all this evening?" They murmured 'fines' and 'goods'. "That's nice," Michelle replied, not really caring what their answers were. Looking at the tall woman next to her wearing far too much makeup, she slipped a possessive arm around her waist. "I'd like you all to meet Nell--she's a model. She and I have been an item for almost two weeks now."

The group murmured 'hi Nell's' and Court went so far as to say 'Nice to meet you Nell'. Her eyes narrowing, Michelle zeroed in on her when she spoke up. It was the trollop who had been the catalyst responsible for her relationship with Erin ending. She had married her! Glancing toward their ring fingers, Michelle disappointingly noticed that they were still wearing those terribly cheap wedding bands. So they had decided to stay married and by the looks of it they were happy. *And* Erin's clique had obviously accepted the little home wrecker. Was there no justice in this world?

"Courtney isn't it?"

The blonde smiled toward her pleasantly, something no one (not even her own father) did. "Yes, that's right. Congratulations on your new relationship. I wish you well."

"Wish that I could say the same to you, but seeing as how you destroyed my relationship with Erin you'll have to excuse me if I can't be big enough to wish *you* well."

"I completely understand and I don't blame you for being pissed. I know I would be in your shoes. But you see Michelle," Court placed an arm across her wife's shoulders, her eyes still on the person she was speaking to, "Erin and I love each other so much. Sure we could have handled what happened in Las Vegas better and been more sensitive to your feelings, but everything happens for a reason. We're together and we're in love. You and Nell have found each other and maybe someday soon if you're not already, you two will also be in love. So please try not to bitter about the past." Court beamed. "Look toward the future."

"Thanks for the advice." Michelle sounded more sarcastic than appreciative. This conversation wasn't going as she had planned. She had wanted to stick it to her ex and Nell wasn't doing the trick. She just stood there with that stupid little smile on her face. "Erin, I'm so sorry about you losing your job." More apparent sarcasm. "You were one of the best employees at Daddy's firm. Too bad."

"Actually, I should thank you for having me fired. Court made me realize that I wasn't happy in that line of work anymore. It was time for a change, so now I have a job that I love going to every day. I didn't think that was possible."

Michelle visibly bristled at her good fortune. "Oh? What do you do now?"

"I own and instruct at an aerobics fitness center called Sweat Factory. Lindsay and Toni work there too." She smiled. "It's wonderful."

"I've heard of the Sweat Factory!" Nell startled everyone by speaking and in such an exuberant

voice. "A few of my friends go there. They like this class called Boot Camp. I've been meaning to check it out. I need to get in better shape." She missed the irritated look that Michelle gave her. She preferred her to be quiet instead of making friendly with them.

You need to get some meat on your bones, Lindsay thought. Nell had a pretty face despite the abundance of makeup but resembling a Popsicle stick was not at all attractive. "You should come by sometime," she offered. "You can drop in on one of the Boot Camp classes for \$10. Erin and I both teach 'em so there are three classes to choose from durin' the week."

"Eventually we plan on having more though," Erin supplied. "Down the road we'd like to hire other aerobic instructors to teach classes so there will be more options."

Nell smiled at them both. "Thank you! Either of you have a business card so I can call?" Erin pulled one of her brand new Sweat Factory business cards from her wallet and handed it to the model.

"Well we have to go," Michelle stated, having had enough of her girlfriend's bonding with the clique. After everyone almost enthusiastically bid them goodbye, the pair moved back toward the bar.

"I could totally work Nell over," Lindsay said as she watched the skinny woman being led away.

"Lin!" A disapproving Adriana shook her head. "How could you say something like that? Remember that girlfriend you have who none of us ever see."

"Chill and get that mind of yours outta the gutter. I didn't mean it like that. I'd like to whip her into shape. She could stand to gain a good twenty pounds at least." Pause. "And ya'll do see Nancy. She was at the club last week."

"I wasn't at the club," Vicki responded.

Adriana turned to her. "You didn't miss much. Lin pointed to her from across a dark crowded room. Not one of us has truly met Nancy." She looked at the Texan suspiciously. "In fact, I'm starting to doubt whether she really does exist or not."

Lindsay rolled her eyes. "Why would I lie about havin' a girlfriend? That's crazy."

"Maybe *you're* crazy."

"And maybe *you're* jealous." Lindsay stuck her tongue out at Adriana.

"Jealous of what? I'd like to think that I could get an imaginary girlfriend. Anyone could do that!" The rest of the observing bunch chuckled.

"She isn't imaginary!"

"Then how come you never bring her to dinner with us and she never goes clubbing with us or participate in any other activity we do together?"

"Don't tell me you're ashamed of us." Vicki pretended to look hurt. "If you were to include Nancy, we would be on our best behavior."

"I'm not ashamed. If ya don't mind, I'd like to bring her to the birthday party." Her gaze swept around the table. "Then ya'll can see that I have a bona fide girlfriend."

Smiling, the redhead nodded. "Sure you can bring her. I look forward to meeting Nancy."

"What are you going to do?" Toni inquired with a teasing smile on her face. "Call Rent-A-Girl?"

Lindsay graced her with a smirk. "Nah, I'll just call your mama. She's always willin' to be my escort among...other things."

Toni made a face. "Eew. Thanks a lot Lin. Now I'm gonna have nightmares!"

Peeking in a window to assure that her wife wasn't in the reception area, Court walked inside the building and headed over to the desk where the new receptionist sat reading a Cosmopolitan magazine. The moment Court arrived at the reception counter Toni looked up, smiling at her. Putting the magazine down, she asked how the other woman was doing on this fine Friday but chilly morning.

"I'm doing great. And yourself?"

"Same here. Are you looking for your other half?" Toni glanced at the small clock on her table. "She's still in her hi/lo impact class, but she'll be out in thirty minutes or so."

Pulling an envelope from her pocket, the blonde leaned against the counter. "I was counting on that actually. I came to see you."

The younger woman appeared fascinated by this revelation. "Oh, really? What can I do for you?" Before Court could answer, Toni's phone began to ring. Asking her friend to hang on a second, she attached her headphones and pressed a button. "Good morning, Sweat Factory aerobics center. This is Toni speaking. May I help you?" Turning toward her computer, she tapped on a few keys. "Yes, we have two spinning classes; one on Tuesdays and the other on Saturdays. Yes, both are in the morning." Ending the call a couple of minutes later, Toni gave the waiting woman her full attention.

"Today is our one month anniversary as a married couple and I wanted to surprise Erin with a romantic evening. However, she'll more than likely come home even before noontime, so I was wondering if you're not busy if you could keep her busy...distracted until around six this evening."

Toni grinned, liking this plan. Sure, she could do that! There were all kinds of things she and Erin could do today. "Absolutely Court. I would love to help out. I'll keep her away from the apartment until six and I won't breathe a word about this evening. What a great idea Court."

"Thank you. And this is for you." She handed the envelope to Toni and watched as she opened it, reading the gift certificate worth \$200 that could be spent at a music store.

"Aw, Court you don't have to--"

"I *want* to." The older woman knowingly grinned. "Plus, I'm hoping that will keep you from downloading songs off the Internet." Court wiggled a finger at the receptionist who attempted to look surprised. "And don't even try to tell me you haven't been doing that. I'd hate to have to come visit you in prison for such a trivial thing."

"Not like I'm selling the CD's I burn. They're strictly for personal use."

"Still you shouldn't be downloading for free."

"Yes mother."

Court smirked. "I must be on my way. Thank you again for helping me and if you have any problems with Erin you have my cell phone number right?"

"Yes, I do and thank you for the gift certificate. I will put it to good use." Leaning back in her chair, Toni allowed a self-assured smile to show. "And don't you worry about Erin. I don't foresee any problems."

"Wait, wait, wait! Where are you going?" She asked while following the taller woman headed toward the exit of Sweat Factory. With a few minutes before noon they had six more hours to kill.

Erin turned around to face her after carefully hiding an exasperated expression. "I'm going home. As you asked, I taught you some yoga poses, we sat in the steam room for a bit and though my intention was to take a long hot bath when I got home at your insistence we showered in the locker room. So, now I'm headed home where my wife is undoubtedly waiting for me. I've had a satisfying yet challenging week and now I just want to go home and spend the weekend with Court." It was true. Erin realized that she couldn't wait to get home. Since she didn't have any classes during the weekend she looked forward to spending the next two days with her new wife. Though Court hadn't given her any indication that she wished their marriage to be genuine, Erin couldn't deny the feelings that had started to arise. With each day that passed, she enjoyed referring to Court as her wife more and more.

Toni considered that she had to come up with an excuse as to why Erin should spend the day with her--and fast. Not completely understanding where she was going with it, she abruptly

began to cry. However, since she wasn't that good of an actress there were no tears, but her performance would have to do. As expected, Erin hurried over to her asking what was wrong as she pulled the smaller woman into her arms.

What was wrong? *Think Toni, think.*

"My dog died," she finally answered, sniffing.

"What dog? I didn't know you had a dog."

"I did four years ago, not long before we met. His name was Homer and today is the anniversary of his death. It didn't hit me this hard last year but for some reason I've been thinking about Homer all morning and I just feel so sad." Toni wiped at her dry cheeks. "He was struck by a speeding car while trying to retrieve his tennis ball. I saw the whole thing...it was horrible. I'll never be able to erase that image from my mind." She started to "cry" again and Erin held her tighter.

"Honey I'm so sorry," Erin replied in a soft tone. "Homer is in a better place now though. He has his pick from a million tennis balls in that canine heaven in the sky and I assure you that he is very happy so please don't cry. I never met Homer but I know he wouldn't want you to be upset. He would want you to celebrate his life not mull over his passing."

Toni pasted on a brave smile. "You know what? You're right Erin. I should celebrate his life--the time we did have together. Will you join me?"

"Join you?" *Uh oh. I have the feeling that I'm not about to get home anytime soon.* Erin mentally chastised herself. *Hey, she's my friend and she needs me. I'll get to see Court later this afternoon. It's not the end of the world.*

"Yes. Spend the day with me. Let's have some fun in honor of Homer's memory. I could close up Sweat Factory early and we could have ourselves an enjoyable day. Just you and me buddy." Toni beamed up at the other woman whose arms were still loosely wrapped around her. "It'll be great."

The brunette playfully kissed the tip of her nose and smiled. "Yeah, let's go get into a little somethin' somethin'."

Grabbing her keys and purse, Toni led her friend out of the aerobic center, making sure to lock up. "First things first. I have a gift certificate that's burning a hole in my purse. It needs to be spent." Having decided to take Toni's car, they headed toward the bright purple VW Beetle with tiny pink and white flowers painted along the sides. Toni's artistic brother was talked into doing it weeks after she bought it, despite his reservations about painting a car purple. According to him no car should resemble an eggplant. It was wrong. Just plain wrong. However, since Toni was his little sister he easily caved in.

"Oh, yeah?" Erin climbed into the passenger seat of the small yet comfortable car. "Who gave

you that?"

Toni started the engine while trying to come up with a suitable lie. She had one by the time she pulled away from the curb. "My dad. I was supposed to meet him for dinner earlier this week but you know how busy he often gets so he had to cancel of course. I guess he felt guilty so he dropped by my place last night and gave it to me. A two hundred bucks worth gift certificate for music."

Erin whistled appreciatively. "It's a shame he had to cancel on you but what a nice guilt gift!"

The younger woman chuckled. "I'll say!"

It took her a minute to remember where she parked in the crowded lot, but once she did Court purposefully headed in the direction of her RAV4 with the purchases she made at the mall in hand. Just as she placed them in the back and closed the rear of the car, she was about to get in when her cell phone rang. Answering it, she was immediately greeted with the pleasurable sound of Erin's voice.

"Hello Mrs. Calloway. What's going on?" Leaning against her car, she listened as Erin explained that she would be spending a few hours with Toni before coming home. She didn't want her to worry about where she could be that's why she called. Court smiled into the phone. "Thank you for calling me and I hope you two have fun. Don't try to rush home--I have errands to run anyway. Enjoy yourself. Okay...bye baby." She pressed the end button just as her wife's ex-girlfriend approached seemingly out of nowhere.

Court's smile wobbled for a moment before she forced it to stay in place. "Good afternoon Michelle. Funny meeting you here." She lightly chuckled but the other woman didn't. "On your way to do some shopping?" She noticed that Michelle wasn't carrying any bags.

"I was and then I saw you standing here, so I thought I'd drop by for a second. How is your marriage going?" She tried to sound courteous but Court saw right through it. Michelle had an agenda.

"It's fine." *You just saw us last night at Tacky Taco. What could have changed in less than twenty-four hours?* "I take it that you and Nell are doing fine too?"

Michelle nodded. "Sure. Hey," a thoughtful look appeared on her face, "more specifically, how are *you* doing?"

Court looked back quizzically. "I'm...good. I'm good."

"Really?" Michelle's head cocked to the side. "Because that private detective I hired a couple of weeks ago said differently. He recently gave me the results and well..." The heiress pretended to look sympathetic as she tapped at her temple with a finger. "I know about your condition. It's

terrible that your mother had the same one. Is Erin aware of it? Have you told her? She seemed so happy last night with you, but I wondered if she knew." She took a quick step back as Court moved toward. Michelle was thrown off balance when the blonde smiled at her, almost like she pitied her. She hadn't expected that reaction.

"Relax. I have no intention of laying even one finger on you," Court stated in a voice one might use when talking to a small frightened child or animal. "Michelle if this is your way of hinting that you're going to tell Erin about my condition as you put it, then go ahead. I won't and even if I was inclined to, I probably couldn't stop you. If causing others pain floats your boat then have at it. And um I know how much you love my advice," Court faintly smiled, "so here is a bit more. When you're at home alone one of these days I want you to take a good look at yourself in a mirror and ask yourself why you do the things that you do and why it brings you such joy to see other people unhappy. Maybe it'll occur to you that although you're pretty on the outside, inside you need to make some drastic changes because Michelle you have one of the ugliest souls that I've ever encountered. Your condition is much worse than mine." Fishing her keys from her pocket Court added, "Now I have to go. Truly, take care of yourself Michelle."

The other woman said nothing as Court turned and headed back to her car. Without another word, she started the RAV4 and pulled out of the parking space and out of the lot. Michelle quietly stood there until a car honked for her to move so that it could occupy the now empty space.

Ten minutes to six, Erin was driving home after Toni dropped her off at Sweat Factory so that she could pick up her car. All in all they shared a pleasurable day together, regardless of Toni suggesting that they get manicures and pedicures at a nail shop across the street from the movie theater where they had just watched *Under the Tuscan Sun*, a film Erin had enjoyed more than she thought she might. However, she wasn't keen on the idea of getting a pedicure (the manicure wasn't so dreadful). It wasn't that she was ashamed of her feet; she just didn't relish the idea of a stranger messing with them. Though if she were completely honest with herself, the brief foot massage had been nice.

She couldn't wait to get home. Maybe they could get a pizza and order a movie or two on the pay-per-view channels. Erin's lips curved in a bittersweet smile. She was quite aware that today was their one-month anniversary, yet they wouldn't be celebrating because one wouldn't celebrate a marriage they planned on terminating in five more months, right? She had thought about and truly wanted to buy Court a present, but then thought better of it. Contemplating her divorce was depressing so Erin tried to push those thoughts from her mind and focus on something else. She thought about the pizza and how she had discovered during their first week of marriage that both she and Court liked pepperoni and mushrooms.

We like the same pizza toppings so that must mean we were made for each other.

Continued In Part 2

The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

~ Courting Erin ~

by Ambrosia

Disclaimers: These folks belong solely to me. If they remind you of anyone that would be veeeery strange *bg* If you're under 18 or the idea of two women in a relationship doesn't appeal to you, you should read something else.

Other Stuff: Since I think that some laws are ridiculous, you'll find upon reading this story that I've modified one or two of 'em to my liking J. Perhaps someday soon they will be.

Feedback: Like to send me your thoughts? Please do so at SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you.

Part 2

Sliding her key into the necessary slots, Erin opened the door and walked inside her apartment. She paused the moment her recently pampered feet crossed the threshold and gazed around the living room in astonishment. The scent of strawberries wafted to her nose as she took in the red candles surrounding the room. The apartment was comfortably warm so Erin thought she should close the door so the heat wouldn't escape. After doing so, she turned around to notice Court watching her with a soft smile from across the room. Erin automatically smiled back while observing the other woman's outfit. Her feet bare of shoes and socks, Court was dressed in a pair of black snug fitting drawstring shorts and a sleeveless red shirt. Though her outfit was simple, Erin believed that she looked positively sexy. It was on the tip of her tongue to say so, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

I'm falling so very hard for my wife, she inwardly admitted. Ordinarily, that would be good a thing.

"Hey Court," Erin's voice was soft and filled with wonder. "What are the candles about?" She then heard the music--soft jazz. Hmm, this seemed like a recipe for romance, but why would Court do it? For a second, Erin irrationally thought that her wife had been expecting someone else.

Keeping silent, the small blonde strolled over to her. Only then did Erin notice that she was holding her right arm behind her back as though she held something that she didn't wish her to see. Wearing that same smile, Court presented her with one long stemmed red rose and kissed her cheek.

"I know we have an unconventional marriage, but I figured we could still celebrate our one-month anniversary. Plus, this could be a celebration in honor of you completing your first week at your new career." Court smiled wider. "So congratulations baby. I'm proud of you."

Aw, damn that was sweet. Blinking back tears, Erin returned the cheek kiss. Swallowing around the sudden lump in her throat, she replied. "Thank you Court. I couldn't have done it without you. Without your faith in me."

Court tenderly brushed the taller woman's cheek with the palm of her hand. "Are you ready to begin the evening?"

Thoughts of a certain dog and this dog's owner entered Erin's mind. It occurred to her that Homer might have been fictionalized, which was good considering his tragic end. "Did Toni help you by keeping me occupied the entire day?"

"Yes, she did." Court grinned. "I heard about your lovely pink tinted toenails. Can hardly wait for you to remove your shoes so that I can check them out. In fact, let's go remove your shoes along with everything else you're wearing."

The brunette was momentarily distracted by Court pulling her through the softly glowing living room and down the hall before the rest of that statement had a chance to soak in. One dark brow curiously lifted. Remove her shoes along with *everything* else? Oh, now this was getting interesting.

Okay, so her wife hadn't meant that sexually, but Erin told herself that it was all right. She hadn't really expected Court to drag her into one of their bedrooms and strip her down for a long passionate night of lovemaking. No, the closest they had come to making love was in her dreams. The true reason that Court wanted Erin to take her clothes off was because she had a strawberry scented bubble bath waiting for her. Strawberry, Erin's favorite fruit was the theme for the evening hence the red shirt Court wore.

The moment Erin settled into the bathtub, Court pressed a button that caused the water to start swirling. Erin could feel the aches in her body lessening as jets that weren't in her bathtub the last time she took a bath, did their work. It was like having a mini spa.

Turning her head on the rolled up towel Court had placed behind her, she smiled at the woman seated on the floor next to the tub. "This feels so nice Court but--"

"It didn't cost much, so you needn't worry."

"Really?"

The blonde nodded. "Really. Could I see your feet?" Erin wordlessly lifted one long leg coated

with bubbles out of the tub. Court grinned as she reached out to tweak the big toe. "What a lovely shade of pink."

Erin smirked as she lowered her leg. "Please don't tell anyone I'm wearing pink toenail polish."

"Your secret is safe with me."

After finishing her bath, Erin put on the clothing that Court had bought for her. Over the weeks her wife had been paying a lot of attention and therefore knew that she enjoyed wearing boxer shorts during the evenings they relaxed at home. So, Erin sat at the dining room table in a pair of silk black boxers with tiny red hearts plastered all over them (Court explained that she couldn't find a strawberry pattern) and a black short-sleeved T-shirt.

Two tapered candles cast a soft glow around the table, which held a small crystal vase filled with red and white flowers, two placemats each with a miniature and regular sized fork, a soup spoon, and knife arranged on neatly folded starched cloth napkins. Next to the placemats were disposable paper bibs, a tool for cracking shells and two empty flutes.

These few clues along with the mouthwatering aroma coming from the kitchen were enough for Erin to guess what they would be having for dinner. However, she questioned how since Court couldn't cook--at all. The ex-lawyer managed to burn bagels in the toaster one morning when she had been in charge of breakfast. Erin had to spend a few minutes explaining the settings on the toaster and when Court attempted to 'cook' two more blueberry bagels they turned out just fine. Well, they were a little crunchy and darker than one might prefer around the edges but were still edible.

Erin finished sending a silent prayer that they wouldn't end up with food poisoning as her wife emerged from the kitchen with a tray in her hands. The experience she gained during the couple of years she spent as a waitress while in law school all came back to her as Court expertly served clam chowder, toasted bread and poured white wine into their flutes. She then took her seat across from Erin who was glancing between her and the food with admiration.

"Wow. This looks and smells terrific Court. I love clam chowder but I haven't had it in months." The brunette smiled. "Thank you for doing all of this. I started to get you an anniversary present--in fact, I wanted to. I just didn't realize that you'd want to celebrate."

Reaching across the table, Court covered her hand. "I don't need a present because I already have one." At Erin's questioning expression she continued, "You. Getting to know you and having your friendship feels like the best present in the world to me. I've never had such a close friend before and I'm so lucky that I found you. I thank you *for* you Erin."

Not bothering to hide the tears falling down her cheeks, Erin scooted away from the table to embrace Court. They silently held each other for a few moments before Court kissed the tip of the taller woman's nose and softly smiled at her.

"Enough of this mushy stuff." They chuckled. "Let's eat my specialty Court Clam Chowder before it gets cold."

"You really um...cooked it?"

The blonde laughed while they retook their seats. "The words sound cordial enough yet you look like you're on the verge of panicking."

"No." Erin shook her head more than she needed to.

Green eyes squinted suspiciously. "Sure, you're not. Truthfully, no I didn't cook it. It's not my clam chowder. It along with the rest of our meal was cooked and delivered by a five star seafood restaurant not far from here." Noticing Erin's look of relief, she laughed again. "Baby I like you far too much to subject you to my cooking. That's much too cruel." When her wife didn't object, she smirked. "Well you could at least pretend that eating my cooking wouldn't be cruel!"

A cheeky smile on her face, Erin picked up her soup spoon ready to dive in. "I've never lied to you before. Why start now?"

"Just for that comment you don't get to have your after dinner mint."

"I've changed my mind," Court stated as she finished drying the remaining dishes. Though Erin had wanted to assist her in cleaning up, she wouldn't allow it. So she sat at the dining room table drinking a cup of the most decadent coffee she ever tasted. It put her usual coffee brand of choice to shame. Erin almost felt guilty. Almost.

"About?"

The blonde placed the last plate in the cabinet before turning around to face her wife with a broad smile. "About your after dinner mint. You may have it."

Erin patted her happy stomach. "I'm pretty stuffed after eating a one and half pound lobster, but I think I could fit in a mint."

"Oh, this isn't your average after dinner mint. You don't eat it."

"Ah, what do you do with it then?"

Asking her to hold on, Court left the room soon to return with a towel, which she laid in Erin's lap. Erin looked at the towel and then her while wondering what it had to do with a mint that she wasn't supposed to eat. She didn't have to wonder much longer, since Court explained to her that she was about to receive a full body massage. That is if she wanted to be given a massage by her wife.

Like she would say no.

Trying not to look too eager, Erin put her empty cup in the kitchen sink and followed the other woman into her bedroom where a massage table had been set up. Court busied herself choosing some relaxing music for her CD player while Erin removed her clothes and wrapped the towel around her waist as she had been instructed to do. Oddly, she didn't feel at all vulnerable, dressed in only a towel that covered her from waist to mid thigh. Perhaps it was because Court had seen her naked on other occasions or maybe she just felt completely at ease around her. She decided that it was more of the latter.

Lying on her stomach on the table with her arms folded beneath her chin, Erin watched Court lighting candles that were in strategic places. Tossing a pack of matches on the nightstand, the blonde flipped the light switch off and walked toward the massage table. Having already guaranteed that her hands were warm, she placed one on Erin's back, gently trailing her fingers across the smooth skin. Erin bit her lower lip to keep from moaning at the welcomed touch. Did Court have any idea what effect she was having on her?

"Are you ready?" Court's voice was low, as though she were about to give her wife a massage in a library. Erin nodded. "Okay. Before we begin, is there any place you'd rather I not touch?" Her fingers kept moving along Erin's back.

If I say no will you touch me everywhere? Only time would tell. "No part of my body is off limits to you." Raising her head, she met Court's eyes. "After all, I am your wife. Do with me what you will." Not realizing that she was holding her breath, Erin waited to see how Court would respond to her brazen reply.

Merely smiling, the blonde grabbed a nearby glass bottle. She seemed so composed that it was impossible to guess what she might have been thinking. Erin hid her frustration. "In that case let's get started."

Pouring a bit of the substance from the bottle into her palm, Court briskly rubbed her hands together before covering Erin's right foot with them, beginning to use a light pressure as her hands slowly moved up and down. Careful not to tickle, Court stroked the entire foot before rotating it toward the left and right several times. Sliding her hands upward, she wrapped her fingers around an ankle, massaging the joint with her thumbs. Adding more liquid to her palm, she repeated on the left foot.

Her eyes closed as she basked in the feel of Court's hands on her, Erin was surprised that she hadn't melted into a puddle on the floor. Though she had experienced massages in the past, none of them had felt like this and her wife had just started. She hoped that she could get through it, because this was both wonderful and tortuous. *This must be something akin to masochism.* Her front teeth kept a hold of her lip, lest she make a sound that the other woman was better off not hearing.

As though she could read her mind, Court commented on Erin's silence while languidly sliding

her slick palms along the backs of her legs. "Erin don't restrain yourself. I want to know if I'm pleasing you." She sounded amused as she added, "So please release that poor bottom lip of yours before you cause it to bleed." A little embarrassed that she had been caught, Erin did as she was told. "Good girl."

"Is that strawberry scented oil?" Erin asked, catching a whiff of the bottled substance.

"Yes. It warms by touching or breathing on the place it's applied."

The brunette glanced over her shoulder toward her masseuse. "Breathing, huh?"

"Yep."

"Prove it." She drank one glass of wine, so Erin could only blame her sudden outspokenness on her libido. She was slowly but surely going crazy with need for this little blonde.

"Prove it." Court nodded, allowing tiny drops of oil to fall onto Erin's calves. "Okay, I can prove it." Her palms smoothed the oil over the fleshy skin using a sweeping motion. After a few moments of this she leaned down, her lips puckering as she softly blew across the shining calves. Her lips lightly grazed the back of a knee right before Court straightened, a little satisfied to notice that the 'massagee' shivered. "Was that warm enough for you or do you require further proof Erin?"

I'm a masochist because I do want more. Erin attempted to ignore the dull throb starting between her slightly parted legs. How was it that Court could pronounce her name in the same tone one would use when telling their lover that they wished to make love to them? Is that the way she would say it if they were to take their relationship to a more intimate level?

"Erin?"

Ah, there it was again. Oh! She had yet to answer the question. "It's um...fine. Just fine. It was hot--warm. I mean it was warm. I felt the..."

Again, she seemed amused. "Warmth?"

"Uh huh." Erin buried her burning face in the space created by her folded arms.

"Would you like me to continue?" The dark head nodded, causing Court to chuckle. "Alright then."

Court proceeded to further massage her wife's legs, alternating between them as her hands traveled back and forth. The tiniest of moans escaped Erin's lips as those petite hands slid toward her thighs, kneading them a bit before Court tugged at the towel in order to remove it. The soft cloth barely created a sound as it made contact with the carpet, but Erin was another matter when she felt warm palms covering her rear. The sound she made was somewhere between a squeal and a moan. Pausing, Court asked if she was all right. Not being able to speak, Erin let her know

with a shake of her head that she was.

The more Court deeply rotated her hands along her cheeks, the more that ache between Erin's legs increased and the wetter she became. Hoping that Court wouldn't be privy to her arousal, Erin was almost afraid to turn over. Had she mentioned that this was sweet torture?

Within a few minutes, the hands responsible for her current state moved on to safer territory as they reached her lower back, beginning to work their magic there. Lifting her head, Erin rested her right cheek on her arms with her eyes closed. She purred when fingers pressed along her spine, steadily moving upward until they reached her neck. Obtaining more oil, Court massaged her shoulders, the nape of her neck and then headed down to refocus on her back. Erin released a rather long delighted moan when Court used the heels of her hands to apply pressure while traveling from the base of her spine to her shoulder blades. She took her time making sure that she massaged and stroked every inch of Erin's back while her wife assured her with variations of moans that she was enjoying every moment.

"Okay baby. If you turn onto your back now I can do your front," Court stated, removing her hands, which Erin missed immediately.

You may do my front anytime you like. Though the table wasn't much wider than her body, she managed to turn over without falling off. Rolling up the discarded towel, Court placed it beneath her neck, making it much more comfortable. Barely cracking open her eyes, Erin observed the other woman's face for signs that she might have been at least half as turned on as she was. Often in particular situations it was difficult to discern what was on Court's mind and this was one of those times. She had her poker face firmly in place. Probably part of the reason she had been such a successful lawyer.

If she had a headache, it would have been eradicated after Court gave her temples and scalp a thorough massage. Court's fingers sifting through her hair was divine. Walking around the table, the blonde gently lifted Erin's arms one at a time, resting them against her chest as she kneaded along the muscles within them before massaging her hands all the way to her fingertips. After Court finished working with her arms, her newly oiled hands took intimate to a higher level.

Standing behind Erin's head again, she trickled a generous amount of strawberry oil onto her shoulders, chest and abdomen. Even the oil dropping onto her skin produced pleasurable sensations in Erin. Keeping her eyes closed, she focused on the hands sliding along her shoulders and then toward the valley of her breasts, unhurriedly moving down her sternum. Although those hands barely brushed against her breasts, they responded, her nipples tightening as they tingled. Erin groaned, wanting her wife's hands to reverse and pay them some attention.

Court's hands reaching her subject's stomach, they glided toward her sides where the heels of her hands discovered and traced her lowest rib toward the center of her back. Positioning her fingers, Court lifted upward while massaging the muscles along Erin's spine. If the brunette wasn't moaning before, she definitely was then as Court's fingers continued to slide upward until they reached her underarms. Using a fair amount of strength, the petite masseuse lifted until Erin's back was arched, her oil covered breasts jutting out proudly. She sighed, not remembering the

last time anything felt this exquisite and stimulating.

"Care to do that again?" Court inquired in a breathy voice. She had returned her hands to Erin's shoulders, gently rubbing them.

Erin glanced up at her. The poker face was still there, but unless she was merely imagining it, her other half might have been breathing a little faster. "Yes. Please," she whispered. By the time Court completed the repeat, Erin's nipples weren't the only parts of her that tingled.

Walking next to the table, Court stopped near Erin's stomach where she placed her hands, beginning to stroke from her abdomen up to her breasts, palms grazing over the excited tips. Her wife moaned every time she repeated from a slightly different angle, until she massaged her entire abdomen. After the final stroke, Court's hands traveled to the front of Erin's thighs, kneading them on their way to her legs.

Pouring the last bit of oil she would use for this massage in her palms, she squeezed along the length of Erin's legs. When she reached the tops of her thighs, Court brought her hands down the sides of her legs, using less pressure as she traveled south. Her hands coming to rest on Erin's ankles, she gave them and her feet another massage, ending with a tug on each toe. Having closed her eyes, Erin didn't notice that Court had walked up to her head again until she felt soft lips on her forehead. Prying her eyes open, she slowly smiled.

Court returned the smile. "How was that?"

"Fantastic. Where did you learn to do that?"

"Mainly research on the Internet. Here, let me help you." Grabbing her wife's hands, she assisted her in sitting up on the massage table. Finding her clothes on the bed, she handed them to Erin. After slipping into her T-shirt, she pulled Court to her, hugging her tightly as she thanked her for the incredible massage. "You're welcome baby," the blonde replied, patting her back. "Anytime."

Erin chuckled. "Think carefully before you speak. I might be inclined to ask you for a massage on a daily basis."

The dessert Court had chosen for the evening consisted of luscious strawberries she scoured through three different fruit and vegetable markets for and a bowl of rich chocolate sauce to dip them in. While sitting on the floor in front of a roaring fire, the couple chatted and ate the strawberries. Well, actually the apartment complex only supplied electric fireplaces, but it was close enough. They could feel the heat if they sat within three feet of the hearth.

"Court I can't believe I've never asked you this, but do you have any siblings?" Dipping the tip of her sixth strawberry, Erin sank her teeth into it.

Tossing the green stem of a strawberry into the bowl, Court shook her head. "I've always wanted

a brother or sister though."

Erin offered her a smile. "You do in a sense. I think Sara adopted you ten minutes after meeting you." A little over two weeks ago they made plans with Erin's sister and her husband to go to dinner and a movie. Sara had wanted to check out her little sister's chosen one. She was known for being a tough critic, but Court instantly won her over. "You are enchanting Mrs. Tucker."

"Ah, but not as enchanting as you Erin."

In that moment the aerobic instructor noticed a tiny brown dot in the corner of her wife's mouth. Pointing toward her own mouth, she informed Court that she was wearing a bit of chocolate. When the blonde started to wipe it away with a napkin, she assured her that she would get it. Fully intending to plant a kiss on Court's lips, Erin slowly leaned toward her. Just as she could feel her breath, Court scooted away from her, quickly running the napkin over her mouth. Masking a pained expression at being rebuffed, Erin was about to speak when the other woman beat her to it.

"I've enjoyed spending time with you Erin, but I think we should call it a night." Getting to her knees, Court picked up the tray now containing four strawberries and a bowl maybe with two tablespoons of chocolate left in it. "I know you must be awfully tired after your first week at Sweat Factory, so I'll clean this up and you can go on to bed, all right?" Not waiting for a reply, Court briefly kissed her cheek before rising. "Goodnight Erin. Sweet dreams."

Erin quietly watched as she headed in the direction of the kitchen with the tray. Humiliated and hurt, she slowly arose, flicked the switch to turn off the electric fireplace and went to her bedroom.

She lay awake for the next three hours thinking of Court--the woman whom she wanted to remain her wife for the rest of her life. How that was going to happen--*if* it would happen, Erin didn't have a clue.

After giving her bedroom a through cleaning, showering and dressing, Erin decided to face Court, who was in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal. She had caught glimpses of her while on the way to the bathroom but they hadn't spoken since last night.

When she walked into the kitchen, they swapped pleasantries as she fixed herself a bowl of cereal, adding a packet of sweetener and sliced two of the leftover strawberries. Sitting across from Court, she swallowed a couple teaspoonfuls of cereal before saying anything else.

"Court, I have three questions for you and I want you to say yes to all of them."

Her eyes on the bowl in front of her, one corner of Court's mouth lifted into a half smile. Glancing at the brunette she replied, "I'll try."

Her stomach too tied up in knots for her to be hungry, Erin pushed her bowl away. "Do you find me at all attractive?"

The petite woman studied her face as though she were determining what her answer would be. "Yes."

"Is that the truth or are you just saying yes because I want you to?"

"Believe me, it's the truth."

Some of her confidence restored, Erin pulled her chair closer to where her wife sat. Their legs touching, she leaned toward her whispering, "If I kissed you right now would you kiss me back?"

Court hesitated just a second before truthfully answering the second inquiry. "Yes, I would."

Erin gave her a smile that made her feel warm all over. "Last question." She paused, gathering her courage. "Will you stay married to me Court?"

Sighing, Court dropped her spoon into the nearly empty bowl. "I'm sorry Erin. That's one question I can't say yes to. At least permanently, which is what I think you're asking."

"Yes, it's what I'm asking. I no longer want a divorce." She searched Court's eyes. "You're telling me that you do? In five more months you want to end our marriage?"

"Don't make this difficult Erin. Come on, you don't want to be with me."

"Oh, I don't? Since when were you an expert on what I want? You obviously have no idea how I feel about you. I've never felt this way about any other woman and I think that you and I could last if we gave us a chance."

"That's what *you* want," Court replied in a kind tone of voice. "Erin I would love for us to remain friends, but I'm not in any position to offer you more than that."

"Why not?" Taking deep breaths, Erin hoped that she wouldn't burst into tears. This wasn't going as well as it had in her mind.

"Because. I just can't."

"That's really not an answer Court. Don't bullshit me. Just come right out and state the actual reason you don't want to be my wife. Pardon me if I'm a little confused. Your mixed signals have me in a jumble. You find me attractive, you'd kiss me back if I kissed you first--that's if you didn't manage to dodge my advances, and you're perfectly willing to give me a sensual massage but you'd drawn the line at making love. What's going on with you?"

Having a hard time meeting Erin's eyes, she looked toward the table. "I never intended to confuse you." Court spoke in such a low voice that Erin had to lean into her in order to hear.

"What did you intend?"

Closing her eyes, Court inhaled sharply. "I can't have this conversation Erin."

"Do *you* even know what you want?" Evidently, Court didn't plan on answering since she kept silent. "Fine." Standing, Erin dumped the soggy contents of her bowl into the garbage disposal and dropped the bowl into the sink before storming out of the kitchen. Grabbing her jacket and car keys she left the apartment, not bothering to tell her wife where she was going.

Sitting in her car, Erin dialed Vicki's cell phone number with a shaky hand. When her friend picked up on the second ring she started to cry, although she had tried to control the tears from falling. Alarmed, Vicki asked if something had happened to her or a family member. Erin immediately assured her that everyone was fine.

"Vicki, are you busy? I need someone to talk to."

"Hey I'm never too busy for my best friend," the doctor gently responded, wondering what had happened but sensing that her friend wouldn't want to discuss it over the phone. "I'm at the hospital but I don't need to prep for surgery for another couple of hours so why don't you come by now, okay? You can meet me at my office."

"Thank you. I'll be right there."

A knock on her closed door, Vicki arose from the couch to open it. Taking notice of Erin's reddened eyes, she pulled her into the office and closed the door before hugging her. They wordlessly embraced for a solid minute, Vicki rubbing her friend's back.

"Sweetie, what happened? Does this have anything to do with Court?" When Erin nodded, she led her to the couch where they sat side by side. "You two have an argument?"

"I argued. She was her usual composed self."

"Tell me what happened." The redhead listened as Erin revealed the true reason she and Court eloped in Las Vegas and why they had chosen to stay together despite the lack of love in their marriage. Erin also explained there no longer was any lack of love on her part and went into detail about the short conversation she and her wife had less than an hour ago.

As she finished, Erin noticed that her friend didn't look surprised. Almost as if she had already been made aware of this. "Vicki, what do you know?"

The doctor thought about how she would answer that. She decided on the truth--to some extent at

least. "Court revealed to me how you two actually tied the knot and why you didn't annul it. However, she didn't mention anything about paying you one million dollars to remain her wife for six months. She did say that you had agreed to be her wife for six months so that she could gain research for a novel."

"When did she tell you this? More importantly, why?"

"The day she came to see me about her migraines and I guess she just wanted to open up to someone, so she chose me." *Please accept that weak excuse. It's the best I can do on short notice.*

Expelling a loud breath, Erin ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. "I don't know what to do... I love her. God help me, I love her so much and I wish that I knew what was going through her head. I wish that I could find out what she is feeling." Tears falling down her cheeks, Erin rested her arms on her knees, her gaze on the floor. "Loving my own wife shouldn't hurt like this. It's been a month and during that month we've bonded--at least I thought we had. And I'm not saying that she's required to love me just because I feel that way for her, but doesn't she feel *anything*? Sometimes I can almost swear that she does, but then it seems like she's holding herself back and I can't fathom why." She glanced toward her friend as though expecting Vicki to have all of the correct answers.

The doctor felt like she was caught between a rock and a hard place. Court had spoken to her in confidence and because of that she could provide her best friend with answers that would help her sort out her confusion. Even if she did break Court's trust, Vicki considered that those answers wouldn't bring her friend much solace. No matter what she did there would undoubtedly be pain. With a soft sigh, Vicki leaned back into the couch. It wasn't her place to tell. It should have been up to Court to do that.

"You should talk to Court sweetie."

"I tried that. The best I could get was 'I'm not in any position to offer you more than that' and then she completely shut down. She refuses to open up to me." Erin paused before tentatively asking, "By any chance, did she share with you how she feels about me? I'd appreciate anything you could give me."

Watch what you say Vicki, the little voice living inside her head cautioned. "She didn't mention it, but in my opinion Court does have romantic feelings for you. How couldn't she?" Vicki grinned. "You're the bomb!" To her relief, that got a laugh out of her longtime friend. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, she gently squeezed. "Babe, don't worry so much okay? It takes some people a while to recognize and admit their feelings, but with time Court may come around. Like you said it's been a month--that's really not that long."

"You think I was pressing her too much this morning?"

"I honestly couldn't say. I wasn't there."

Erin shook her head. "She never lost her cool and I behaved like a jerk."

"Don't speak about one of my favorite people like that. You have never nor are you now a jerk. You want to fight for your marriage. There's nothing wrong with that. You want some coffee? I make my own because the stuff in the vending machine tastes like mud." Vicki pointed to her percolating coffee pot.

"Yes, thanks. When's the last time you dined on mud?"

Chuckling, the redhead walked over to pour them both a cup of coffee. "I believe around the 2nd or 3rd grade. This boy and I had a bet. The first one to eat a whole mud pie would win fifty cents from the loser. I remember that our entire class was standing around watching." Vicki glanced over her shoulder, winking at her friend. "Most of them were cheering for me of course because I've always been miss popularity."

Erin laughed as Vicki walked back to the couch with two mugs. "So who won the mud pie eating contest?" Taking one of the mugs, she thanked the other woman.

"I did, however I didn't collect my money until Friday. He was broke and had to wait until his parents gave him his allowance. I thought about charging him interest, but changed my mind." They both laughed at that.

The friends chatted for a little while longer until Vicki received a page. Erin glanced toward her watch. It was nearly noon. "I better let you go now. Thank you for talking with me Vicki." They hugged again.

"You don't need to thank me sweetheart. Are you headed home to see Court now? It's a nice Saturday. You two shouldn't spend it apart. Maybe go to the park and have a picnic." Grabbing her long white smock from the coat hanger, Vicki slipped into it.

"I will soon. While you're out, is there anything that I can do for you in your office?"

Grinning, Vicki fixed her collar. "Like what? Sharpen my pencils? If you want something constructive to do in order to procrastinate kissing and making up with your wife for a bit, go up to the Pediatrics Ward. Tyrell still volunteers there and he came with me today. I'm sure he would happily put you to work."

Arriving on the Pediatrics floor, Erin exited the elevator. It only took her a few moments to remember where the nurse's station was. Walking up to the area, she waited for the one of the three seated nurses to notice her. Glancing up from the computer screen, Deanne who was the head pediatrics nurse gave her a smile that even Scrooge before he changed his miserly ways would have found difficult not to return. Removing her glasses, the nurse politely asked Erin what she could do for her. Was she there to visit with a patient?

"Actually, Dr. Vicki Lange one of the neurosurgeon's sent me here to volunteer with her son Tyrell. Do you know where I could find him?"

Her smile growing, Deanne nodded. "I know Dr. Lange and Tyrell. He's a fine young man and one of the best volunteers we have. Even better than the adults." Standing, the nurse asked Erin to follow her. As they walked along a corridor, she explained, "It's almost lunch time so Tyrell gathered the children able to leave their beds in the activity room to eat. Here we are." Stopping in front of an open door, both women smiled at the scene within the spacious room.

Twelve little people, some dressed in hospital gowns and others in pajamas, sat in groups of three at miniature colored plastic tables with matching plastic chairs that an average sized adult might have broken. Obviously going for a restaurant motif, Tyrell had put decorative tablecloths on the tables and placed a bouquet of flowers made out of construction paper in the middle of them. A small plastic cup and plastic silverware were placed in front of each child. Songs, some of which Erin hadn't heard since her childhood merrily played on a radio. A few of the children were singing along to *This Old Man (Knick - Knack Paddy Whack)*.

Leaving Erin with the fifteen-year-old volunteer, Deanne headed back to the nurse's station. Surprised and delighted to see her, Tyrell dressed in a vivid green apron with cartoon farm animals in front of a huge red barn on it, hugged her. Though she had seen him a couple weeks ago, Erin could have sworn that the teenager had grown another inch. At fifteen he was nearly as tall as her and she figured that he would surpass her height within a year or so.

Stepping back, Tyrell beamed, showing Erin the advantages of his two years spent with braces. He couldn't have been happier to get them removed right before starting as a freshman in high school. "Hey Auntie Erin. What's up?"

"I stopped by to have a chat with your Mom and she suggested that I come here to see if I could lend you a hand or two. So do you need any assistance?"

"I could always use some extra hands. Thank you for coming." He smiled again and Erin smiled back. He was so cute! Well handsome actually. When she first met him when he was seven, she thought he was cute, but now he could be upgraded to handsome. Tyrell reminded her of a young Denzel Washington and she had made sure to good-naturedly tease him about that on more than one occasion. Secretly, he liked it.

"Their lunch will arrive shortly so if you wouldn't mind, you could help some of the kids to eat. The group at Table 2," he indicated with a short nod of his head toward the two little boys and girl seated at the table with tiny yellow ducks on the tablecloth, "tend to need help with their meals. Joey just likes to eat his dessert. Daniel mainly enjoys playing with his food. And Tara...well..." Tyrell grinned. "She's a stubborn one. I think it might have something to do with the fact that she misses her mom. She can't be here during the daytime except for Sundays and Mondays because she has to work and it upsets Tara that most of the time she only gets to see her in the evening."

"Hmm, a challenge." Erin smiled. "I'm up for it."

Tyrell reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "I figured you would be." Taking Erin by the hand, he started to introduce to everyone. Luckily, they were wearing paper nametags so that they could memorize each other's names. Having forgotten the little boy who tattled on her in Las Vegas when she was locked outside of her hotel room, meeting these precious ones kicked in Erin's maternal urges again. She briefly imagined a baby with bright green eyes and dark curly locks.

Within five more minutes the sound of wheels rolling along the floor could be heard in the room. Everyone turned toward the door as a petite person lugged a cart behind them filled with trays into the activity room. On closer inspection the person was a female although she was wearing a thick jet-black moustache that curled at the ends. The tall white chefs hat on her head kept the color and length of her hair from view and she wore an apron identical to Tyrell's, except that the background color was red instead of green. When she opened her mouth, she spoke in an indefinable accent, but it made the children laugh, which was the most important thing.

The 'chef' was Court. Erin knew that the moment she laid eyes on her. Although Court and Tyrell had met, she had no idea that they volunteered in the Pediatrics Ward together. Based on the easy manner in which Court greeted the children as she delivered meals to their tables, Erin guessed that this wasn't her first time as a volunteer. She just never mentioned it.

Not sure how to approach her, Erin headed directly toward the cart and grabbed two of the trays, giving them to the children whose nametags matched those written on the plastic cards sitting on the trays. On her way back to the cart for one of the few trays left, her eyes connected with a particular pair of light green ones. Her heart swelled with love when the right eye winked at her and the lips on that same face split into a smile. Ah, they were okay. Court wasn't upset with her. *Even when I act like an ass she's gracious. No wonder I love her.*

By the time lunch was over, Erin had managed to get Tara to eat 80% of her meal, which she was told was a great improvement over the last two weeks that the little girl had been a patient. After promising to pay him a dollar (hey, whatever works), that gave Joey incentive to eat his food before he delved into his dessert--a J-ello and two peanut butter cookies. As for Daniel, Erin allowed him to make a mashed potato castle, a pea and carrot trench and a Salisbury steak king and queen before encouraging him to eat his creation. As it turned out, he loved every moment of chewing his medieval art.

The three volunteers had the tables cleared of dishes, cleaned and the cart back in the kitchen in no time. The diners who had decorated themselves with food were cleaned up as well. Tyrell and Court removed their aprons and she her hilarious moustache and chefs hat. Still at their tables, though the tablecloths were gone, the children cheered when Tyrell informed them that it was time for arts and crafts and that they would be painting today. They loved to paint. It was messy and fun. Their nurses would be busy giving baths that evening. Those were not so fun; yet getting to paint was worth the agony of soap and water.

Being dressed in their own small aprons, the children concentrated on the large white thick sheets of paper before them, paintbrushes in their for the moment clean hands. Seated at a big

person's table near the back of the room, Erin dipped the tip of her paintbrush into one of the colors before moving it along the paper. She hadn't done this in years and she remembered why. She couldn't even draw a circle correctly. *These little ones paintings will probably turn out better than mine*, she thought to herself while rinsing her brush and selecting another color. Erin was adding the final touches when she noticed Court approaching her. Hurriedly, she grabbed the drying picture and put it on her lap underneath the table.

With a raised eyebrow, Court sat in the chair next to her. She attempted to look under the table, but Erin hid her painting well. "Something you don't wish to share with the rest of us?" Erin shook her head no. "Why not?" She grinned at her wife. "Couldn't be that bad."

The brunette snorted. "It makes bad look good."

Court's expression was one of great interest. "Let me see it. Please."

"Only if you promise not to laugh."

"Nope."

"Nope?"

"That's right. Nope. Anytime someone tries to get someone else to promise that they won't laugh or get upset it's almost guaranteed that they will. So I am not going to lie to you baby. My funny bone just might be tickled, but see you must show me anyway because I'm prepared to beg you. You really want me to get down on my knees in front of these kids?"

"Okay...promise me that you'll at least try not to laugh."

Court appeared as though she was trying to stifle a chuckle already. "Alright. I'll promise you that." Within two seconds, Erin's painting was slid onto the table in front of her. Making her expression blank, Court studied the picture of two stick figures--one taller than the other--holding hands as they smiled ahead. Tiny green dashes on the bottom of the paper had Court thinking that they represented grass, so the stick figures must have been standing in a field of grass--perhaps they were in the park. It was a lovely day considering the sun shone brightly above and there were only two clouds in the sky. Three birds soared above the stick figures nearly circular heads.

"Aw, isn't that sweet? Two anorexic lesbian lovers holding hands with three of the six fingers they each have. I guess six fingers are good though, considering that they have no toes. The shorter girl is sporting one groovy blonde Afro."

After having Court promise that she would try to contain her laughter, Erin was the first to do it as she playfully slapped her wife's arm. "You can be such a meanie!"

Court snickered. "Nah, I'm not trying to be mean." She pointed at the painting. "It's cute. Who are these naked people?"

"I never said that they were lovers and they're you and I." Erin slapped her arm again. "Also, we are not naked. We're wearing clothes *and* shoes, which is why you don't see our toes." She kept her voice low so that impressionable ears wouldn't hear their conversation.

"Really, because I see no clothes. We must have taken them off when you had us on your lap. We must be extra skinny strippers or streakers. Ow!" Court grabbed her arm while pretending to frown. "Stop abusing me you big bully."

"Big?"

The blonde slowly grinned. "I call 'em like I see 'em."

"I reiterate that you are a meanie."

Green eyes rolled. "Whatever you say baby." Court tapped the picture. "Will you put your Jane Hancock on the right hand corner so I can put this on the refrigerator when we get home?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Because it's a picture of us and I want to proudly display it. Despite my ribbing, I am touched that you painted a picture of you and me together. It really is sweet." She sounded so earnest that Erin pulled the painting over, dabbed the paintbrush in black and carefully wrote her first name in the bottom right corner. She blew on it a couple of times to help it dry faster. Court smiled at her and then the picture. "Now it's perfect."

Dropping the paintbrush into water that used to be clear, Erin turned toward her wife. "I'm so sorry about this morning. I tried to pressure you into feeling something that I do and that was wrong."

Tenderly smiling, Court kissed her cheek. "Don't worry about it. Let's forget that ever happened."

"Just like that?"

Court grabbed her hand beneath the table and squeezed. "Just like that."

I love you Mrs. Tucker.

Three hours into Keisha's 40th birthday party and everyone was having a jolly time conversing, visiting the vast buffet that had been set up in the dining room, and listening and dancing to a variety of music from the 70's, 90's, and er...00's. The main person in charge of selecting songs, Tyrell had thrown in a few 80's tunes just in case there were those in the sea of people who were fans of music from that decade.

Yes, everyone--especially the birthday girl who had been pleasantly surprised to arrive home after watching a terrific play with her wife to find close to fifty people (including her sister) wearing party hats and yelling 'happy birthday Keisha' at the top of their lungs--was enjoying themselves. Well, except for Court who was sitting at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second level of the house rubbing her temples in a vain attempt to get rid of her colossal headache. Never having one quite this strong before, it felt as though someone was repeatedly taking a mallet to her head.

Up until fifteen minutes ago she had been among those having a good time. The sharp pain in her head started while she was sharing an engaging chat with and getting to know Lindsay's girlfriend. The moment she stepped through the front door with her, it was obvious to her friends why she might have kept them from meeting Nancy. Whereas Lindsay was 33, her partner was 21 and a senior in college. They reassured her that dating someone that young wasn't anything to be embarrassed about. Of course, Toni couldn't resist referring to Lindsay by the name of Mrs. Robinson a couple of times.

Noticing the small blonde methodically massaging the sides of her head while resting on the bottom stair, Keisha excused herself from the conversation with her sister Tamara and a friend. Sitting next to Court, she squeezed the younger woman's knee. When green eyes looked up at her, the pain in them was evident. Concerned, Keisha asked her if she was having another migraine. Court answered the question with a nod as she resumed rubbing her temples.

"Did you bring the medication Vicki prescribed for you?"

"No." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Do you have anything that's good for headaches?"

"There's some ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet. Why don't you get a couple out of our master bath and then lay on the bed for a while. It's noisy down here and you need a quiet place to rest. I'll make you a cup of herbal tea and bring it up to you."

Agreeing to that idea, Court thanked her before rising and walking up the stairs. Reaching the top, she turned and searched the first floor until her eyes landed on her wife. She managed a tiny smile as she watched Erin and Lindsay raiding the buffet for more buffalo wings. She couldn't blame them. The wings were very yummy.

Tearing her eyes away, she walked down the hall toward the master bedroom. Walking inside she shut the door before heading into the bathroom where she quickly located the bottle of ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet. Tossing two of the oval pills into her mouth, she washed them down with handfuls of water from the sink just as a wave of nausea went through her. She gripped the edges of the sink, closed her eyes and willed the uncomfortable feeling to go away. Unfortunately, it didn't until she emptied the contents of her stomach in the toilet.

"Not now," Court murmured as she flushed the toilet with a shaky hand. "Please not now." Returning to the sink she tried rinsing the acidic taste from her mouth with water, her entire body trembling with the effort not to collapse. She groaned as pain radiated through her head and

down to her neck.

"Erin," she whispered just before she lost consciousness. The side of her head struck the edge of the sink as she fell to the floor.

Carrying Court's tea, Keisha entered hers and Vicki's bedroom to discover that her friend wasn't on the bed yet. Walking over to the closed bathroom door she softly knocked. Since Court didn't answer, she knocked again but still didn't hear a word. She was about to leave in order to see if the woman had returned to the party when she detected the sound of running water. Pressing an ear to the door, she confirmed that the sink was on, which meant that Court had to be in there unless she forgot to turn it off. Concern overriding the need to give Court her privacy Keisha opened the door. She gasped when she spotted the blonde sprawled on the floor, her eyes closed and her body completely still.

"Oh God. Court!" Kneeling on the floor, Keisha lightly tapped her cheek before noticing the bruise forming near her left temple. Checking her pulse and relieved to find one, she sprinted from the room in search of her mate.

Immediately locating Vicki, she quietly yet urgently informed her that Court had hit her head on the bathroom sink and was passed out on the floor. Telling her wife to find Erin, she headed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Reaching the bathroom, she blinked back tears when her eyes fell on the small form lying on the bathroom rug. Getting to her knees, she inspected the wound on Court's head and concluded that it wasn't the reason that the woman had lost consciousness. Hitting her head didn't help, but it wasn't the doctor's main concern. Court collapsed because of the condition that she hadn't sought treatment for. Vicki sent a silent prayer that it wasn't too late.

"Damn it Court. I never should have let you walk out of my office that day." They needed to get her to a hospital as soon as possible. Deciding that driving to the hospital would be quicker than waiting for an ambulance, Vicki went into the bedroom and grabbed her keys from the dresser as Keisha and an obviously flustered Erin rushed into the room. Sparing her best friend a glance, she hurried toward the bathroom, a small cry passing her lips as she dropped on the floor next to her wife.

Following her, Vicki informed Erin of her plan to drive them to the hospital. Careful not to move her, Erin gently trailed her fingers through Court's hair while insisting that they take her RAV4 since it was roomier than Vicki's car.

"Great. Let's get a move on ladies." All three women turned to see Lindsay standing behind them. With Erin at the time Keisha told her about Court's injury, she had overheard. Everyone else downstairs didn't have a clue what was going on. "I'll carry her to the car 'cause Erin you're in no position to do so. You're shakin' like a leaf on a tree." Smiling at the worried brunette as she walked closer Lindsay added, "Don't fret darlin'. Court just has a bump on the noggin. She'll be good as new in a lil' bit." Lifting Court into her strong muscled arms, the southerner exited the

bathroom, indicating for them to follow her.

Luckily, Keisha and Vicki's house had a backdoor, so they were able to leave without anyone noticing the unconscious blonde in Lindsay's arms. Once she was settled in the back of her Toyota, Vicki obtained the keys from Erin intending to drive. It was decided that Keisha and Lindsay would stay so that they could alert the guests that there was an emergency and therefore the party was over. Saying that they would meet them at the hospital, the two women headed back inside the house as Erin climbed in the back to sit with her wife. Starting the ignition, Vicki pulled into the street.

"Do you think she has a concussion?" Erin asked, her voice tremulous as though she was barely controlling herself from crying. She took one of Court's hands in her own, lightly stroking the back of it with her thumb.

Her eyes remaining on the road, Vicki nervously tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "It's possible sweetie. I'll order a CT scan once we get to the hospital. That should tell us what we're dealing with."

Neither of them spoke during the next few miles, each lost in their own thoughts. Vicki was lost in guilt and regret, though she told herself that Court was a grown woman and was capable of making her own decisions concerning her health. She couldn't force her to receive treatment. It was up to her and now she might have succeeded in putting herself in even more danger. Sure, Court had refused treatment, but the doctor would never forgive herself if something happened to her best friend's wife. *I shouldn't have given her that Lidocaine. I should have persisted. Erin doesn't even know.*

"Why won't she wake up?" Erin softly asked, her tear filled eyes on the smaller woman she cradled in her arms. Before her friend could respond, Court faintly moaned, her eyelids fluttering as she struggled to wake up. Sighing in relief, Erin touched her cheek while calling her name. After repeatedly opening and closing her eyes, Court focused up toward her face. A smile touched her lips, her hand giving a tiny squeeze to the one holding hers.

Glancing back at the couple, Vicki briefly smiled. It was some good news that Court had awoken and appeared lucid, considering she asked her wife where they were going. Her lucidity increased when she learned the answer. Although Erin begged her stay still, she lifted her upper body until she was fully sitting up.

"I don't need to go to the hospital," she said, speaking to them both. "I'm fine. I just had another migraine."

"You need a CT scan for that bruise on your head Court," Vicki replied. "You could have a concussion."

Court hadn't realized that she struck her head on her short journey to the floor until she touched the sore area, wincing. "I doubt it. I only need a good night's sleep. That's all. Could you please take us home? You can drive my car back to your house and Erin could drop me off in the

morning to pick it up."

"No."

Court frowned. "I have the right to refuse going to the hospital to have a procedure that is absolutely unnecessary."

"You're right. You do." The driver slowly nodded as made a left turn into the hospital's parking lot. "However, you might not be thinking clearly because of a possible concussion. Therefore, as a doctor I feel that you should be checked out regardless. Now if it turns out that nothing is wrong I will be more than happy to drive you two home." Finding a space near the front entrance, Vicki parked then stuck the keys into her pants pocket. If Court wanted them she would have to slip her hand in there to get them. Turning around, she eyed the still frowning blonde. "You should stop frowning. Your face might set like that and then people will start referring to you as Grumpy." She grinned but evidently Court wasn't amused.

"I want to go home." Despite the deep frown, her voice was soft and pleading. When Erin insisted that she get a CT scan just to be on the safe side, she shook her head. "Baby, I know my body better than anyone. I'm not getting in one of those machines."

"You claustrophobic now?" Vicki inquired, looking unconvinced.

"Yes," she lied.

"If you hadn't lost consciousness we wouldn't be so concerned. But you did and for nearly a quarter of an hour. Court just agree to have the scan."

Court stared at the redhead. "It's a waste of time. I don't need nor do I want it. Thank you for your concern but you won't force me into having a CT scan." Never in the five weeks they had known her, had Vicki or Erin heard even an iota of anger in the older woman's voice until that moment. Court's carefully guarded composure had slipped a notch.

Vicki thought about patient confidentiality for three seconds before she inwardly told it to take a flying leap. What she was about to reveal could very well cost her her license, but right then she honestly didn't care. Enough was enough. She wasn't about to allow Court to continue destroying herself if she could do something about it. Although she realized that it was a huge stretch, Vicki told herself that in a sense by not seeking medical attention Court was slowly committing suicide. Threatening bodily harm to oneself was an exception to the rule of keeping a patient's medical information confidential. Okay, so she wasn't threatening bodily harm, but close enough!

"How did you fall?"

"What?"

"Was your hearing affected? How did you fall?"

"I tripped."

"Tripped," Vicki repeated the word in a way that could cause someone to question whether she believed the answer. "You tripped on the rug, hit your head and slipped into unconsciousness. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes." Court's voice sounded a bit tight.

The woman still seated in the driver's seat grew thoughtful. "I realize that you are the only lawyer in this car but please allow me to dabble in your field for a few minutes." Claspng her hands together, Vicki glanced between Court's cautious look and Erin's perplexed one. "The reason you were unconscious was because you struck your head, correct?" A blonde head nodded. "But you claimed that you didn't know that you hit your head. Only that you were rendered unconscious, so how did you conclude that was the reason when you didn't know until we told you?"

"Pardon?"

"Sorry. I'll try to explain my question better." Pause. "It's a fact that you know you were unconscious. However, you were unaware that you hit your head. That might lead one to believe that you lost consciousness before your head connected with the sink."

Court tried not to look as uncomfortable as she felt. "That's not a question."

"Did you lose consciousness before you hit your head?"

"No."

Vicki sighed. "Excuse the violent example, but if someone aims a gun at you, shoots and the bullet pierces your chest, seconds later you might faint. Provided you live, when you wake up in the hospital do you know that someone shot you?"

"I suppose unless you're having problems with your memory." Immediately after giving the reply, Court figured she could use it to her advantage. "Which must be what happened to me. I do remember tripping but the part where I hit my head is a little fuzzy."

"All the more reason for you to have a CT scan then." It was like being on a never ending merry-go-round.

"Guys, I feel like I'm being left out of the loop," Erin exclaimed. "What's going on here? Vicki if you're trying to say something then just say it. Obviously, you don't believe that Court's head injury is the cause for her loss of consciousness, so what do you believe happened?"

Court didn't give the doctor a chance to answer when she hurriedly stated, "I've changed my mind. I'll have the scan. Let's go inside." She was about to leave the car when Vicki inquired

why she changed her mind. "Well, because you're right. My memory of falling is fuzzy and my head is throbbing. So I'll get it done. I may be the lawyer but you're the doctor." She tried smiling. "I could have a concussion."

Erin gazed at her curiously. "Funny how you suddenly changed your mind after being so adamant that you didn't require medical attention Court. Are you hiding something from me?" Her blue eyes were shining; a clear sign that she might have been close to tears. "Please tell me. I know I'm only your wife temporarily, but I'd like to think that you could confide in me." Court looked at her, surprised that she would announce that in front of her friend. "Vicki knows of our arrangement. I revealed it to her last Saturday to discover that she already knew thanks to a certain blonde. So, are you going to tell me?"

Court perceived that the only way she was going to get out of this conversation was to tell Erin the truth. She really didn't have a choice because Erin wasn't about to relent. Up until now, the only people who were privy to the truth was the doctor who discovered her condition back in Boston, one friend she had back in Boston and Vicki. The main reasons she had kept it a secret was because she didn't want to talk about it for fear of having a break down and she didn't want anyone's pity.

Court looked at Vicki and then Erin while trying to force her mouth to move so words could spill from it. "I...last year I went to see a doctor because I was having some headaches and though being a lawyer can be stressful and give you headaches I knew that these were different. He ran tests and discovered that I had an aneurysm." She had to look toward her lap when Erin's eyes filled with tears. "He called it a giant aneurysm, which meant that it was over 2.5 cm and since it was in a complicated location, he wasn't sure that operating would be beneficial. So that's when I retired and decided to travel. My plan was to enjoy whatever time I had left. It took a while but I soon accepted it."

Erin shook her head as tears strolled down her face. "You're just going to wait until it ruptures? Why won't you let Vicki look at it? Surely there's something that could be done." Not waiting for an answer, Erin turned toward her friend wearing a hopeful expression. "I know you must have performed these types of surgeries before. Do you think Court's aneurysm is inoperable? I mean in this day and age isn't there a way to remove it?"

"Though Court told me about her aneurysm during her appointment with me, she didn't want to be examined. That's why I'm anxious to get this CT scan. Her headaches are becoming more severe, she passed out tonight and both could be a sign that the aneurysm is leaking."

"I'm willing to have the CT scan," Court softly interjected. "Though I doubt it'll..." She trailed off, her voice sounding resigned.

Vicki looked like a woman yearning to kick someone's butt. "Court I don't know who this doctor you saw is, but I'd like to get the idiot's license revoked. What kind of doctor tells you that you have a giant aneurysm and that he can't do a damn thing about it? Evidently, he didn't have the balls or the skills to perform the surgery so he informs you that you shouldn't have one. And not that I'm lecturing you...okay I *am* lecturing you, but honey did you ever think about getting a

second opinion? Those can be helpful you know."

"I figured he knew what he was talking about. I was already depressed and didn't want another doctor telling me the same thing."

"Somehow I'm not certain that would have happened." Turning around, Vicki opened the driver's side door. "Consider me your new doctor Court. Follow me ladies and I'll take care of that little bastard." Jumping out, she slammed the door.

Although Erin was still wiping at tears, she had to chuckle due to her friend's statement. Within a couple of seconds, her wife joined in.

"I wonder if that was in reference to the aneurysm or the doctor," Court commented just before opening the rear door.

"I'm thinking the aneurysm, yet soon she might take care of that doctor too."

The hospital's Radiology Department stayed open twenty four hours and 365 days a year, so it didn't take long for Vicki to obtain the results of Court's CT scan. Usually it could take anywhere from one to three days to get results, but she put a rush on them, considering this was an emergency. Though the images she had on her computer didn't show a distinct picture of the aneurysm, the neurosurgeon's suspicions could be confirmed. The giant aneurysm (aptly named) was leaking into her brain and that could spell nothing but trouble.

With a sigh, Vicki sat back in her chair as she thought on how to proceed. Since she needed a clearer picture on the size and location of the aneurysm, further tests would have to be run. Some people experienced problems while trying to adjust to the constricted space of a CT scan machine and having to remain completely still, yet Court was easily able to get through the painless procedure. However, what Vicki was about to suggest to her next was undoubtedly going to be a greater challenge.

Sweetie, I apologize in advance. Standing, Vicki slipped into her white jacket and left her office, heading in the direction of Court's room. She hadn't been admitted into the hospital, but the doctor was about to suggest it. When Vicki passed by the waiting room, she heard a familiar voice call her name and looked inside. An instant smile fell on her lips as her eyes swept around the room outfitted with plush chairs, a coffee table, magazines, and a television attached to one of the walls. Of course, she was more interested in the people filling some those chairs.

Keisha had called her just as Court was being taken to Radiology to ask if she was awake yet. Thinking that it would be up to Court if she wanted to reveal her condition to others, Vicki informed her wife that she was awake and coherent, but didn't explain the true reason she had collapsed. Despite Vicki telling Keisha that she would soon call her with an update, the veterinarian insisted that they come to the hospital and now Vicki saw whom 'they' included. Visiting hours were over, so only people there to check on Court were in the waiting room. They

were Keisha, Tyrell, Adriana, Toni, Lindsay and her girlfriend Nancy who also wanted to come although she had met Court only hours ago.

"Honey, how is she doing now?" Keisha asked, approaching the redhead standing near the door. "Did she have a CAT scan of her head for that bruise?"

Vicki nodded. "She's still awake and talking. She had a scan not too long ago and I was on my way to see her and Erin."

"Did you get the results?" Lindsay inquired, remaining in her chair with one arm around Nancy's shoulders. When the doctor confirmed that she had, Lindsay's next question was to ask about what she found in those results.

"Lin, I'm not authorized to reveal that information. Why don't you guys let me discuss this with Court and Erin first okay? I know you all are worried, but she's in good hands." Wiggling her fingers, Vicki grinned at the group. "Sit tight and I'll be back." When everyone nodded or spoke their agreement, Vicki planted a kiss on Keisha's mouth before leaving.

Knocking on the door, the doctor waited to be granted access before walking inside. Court and Erin were sitting on one of the two beds in the room, holding hands. Their eyes were glistening and a little puffy, causing Vicki to suspect that she had interrupted a private moment.

"I'm sorry. I could come back in a few minutes if you two want some more time to yourselves."

"No, don't go Vicki. We were just chatting," Court stated, dabbing at her eyes with the tissue in her free hand. "Do you have the results of my scan?"

"Yes, I do." Closing the door, she pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat down. "Evidence showed up that the aneurysm is leaking so what I would like to do now is get you a cerebral angiogram in order to obtain more details on the aneurysm." After a slight pause, Vicki added, "Sweetie, you're going to need immediate surgery." Court looked less than thrilled over learning that. "The fact that it's leaking means that it will rupture soon. Also, you're in danger of having a stroke."

"How long before it ruptures?"

Vicki shook her head. "I couldn't give you a specific time, but I would say no more than a week. Usually when an aneurysm starts leaking, it isn't long before it completely ruptures. You told me during your appointment that you didn't want surgery because you were afraid that something would happen, but Court...I'm going to be honest with you. If you do not have this surgery you won't make it to Thanksgiving. I realize I'm probably scaring you and to tell you the truth, I'm not in the least bit sorry because it is imperative that you have that aneurysm taken care of right away. Your life depends on it." Reaching out, Vicki placed her hand on the older woman's knee. "I know this is a difficult situation, but sweetie you are a brave one. You can do this. You have your lovely wife here." She glanced toward Erin, smiling. "And you have your very own support system anxiously waiting for news in the waiting room. And I'll see you through this too. We're

going to beat this. What do you say?"

Court looked between her wife and the woman who had quickly become one of her closest friends. Vicki was right. She could and should do this. Just thinking about going under the knife was terrifying, but she had to. Months ago, the ex-lawyer had accepted her imminent death, but she no longer wanted to. She wanted to live again. Court squeezed the hand pressed against her own. She had something to live for.

"I say we take care of the little bastard."

"She's going to what?!" Court's eyes grew wide as she stared at the two women like they were escapees from the psych ward. "That can't be possible. No way."

"Court," Vicki gently started.

"No, no, no Vicki." The blonde shook her head hard enough to develop whiplash. "There must be another less invasive test you can perform to get a good look at the aneurysm. This angio-- whatever you call it, I can't deal with it. Na ah. No way." Sitting in a chair wearing nothing but a hospital gown, Court pointed to the IV, which had been inserted in her left hand. "I loathe needles but I got this done, I had some of my blood drawn and I quietly laid in the donut hole of that CT scan machine so internal pictures of my body could be snapped, but this," She indicated the x-ray bed about ten feet away from her chair, "I don't know about this. I know that you only want to help me and I appreciate it, but couldn't you do that using another method?"

The woman standing next to Vicki informed her that she would like to answer their patient's questions. Nodding her assent, the neurosurgeon listened. "Ms. Calloway--"

"Court please."

"Court," kneeling on the floor in front of the blonde although there was another chair next to her, the radiologist was almost eye level with her, "I realize this procedure sounds frightful, but it's really not as bad as it sounds. That IV and the blood work probably hurt worse than this will." Court didn't look convinced. "For real. I can't tell you how many angiograms I've performed through the years, because there have been so many. The worst part is getting an injection in your groin to numb the area before threading the catheter. That might sting a bit. The actual threading of the catheter doesn't hurt--at all. You won't feel it because I won't be touching nerves. And once the catheter is in place I'll inject contrast dye into it and you'll feel a rush of warmth through your body, but it won't be painful and it won't last any longer than a minute. Now anytime during the angiogram if you feel pain despite my guarantees that you won't, you may smack me after we're finished." The radiologist grinned and Court found herself smiling back.

"Are you sure it's not going to hurt?"

"It's not going to hurt. Not to toot my own horn, but Court I'm great at what I do and therefore I

will not hurt you. That's a promise. Like I said, the anesthetic so you *won't* feel anything is the worse part and that's not horrible. And I'd be happy to slip a small dose of sedative into your IV line. That'll help relax you."

"Oh yeah. I definitely want a sedative. Vicki are you staying?" She asked, looking at the redhead. The doctor smiled, assuring her that she would. "Good." She took a deep breath and then loudly expelled it. "Okay, I'm ready."

A tight bandage wrapped around the upper region of her thigh held the small incision beneath it together as Court lay in the hospital bed in what was now her room since she had been admitted after Vicki revealed the results of her CT scan. The radiologist (whose promises she could trust since the actual angiogram hadn't been painful) and Vicki informed her that it was important for her to keep her right leg straight for the next six hours. The incision couldn't be disturbed. It occurred to Court that *this* was the worse part. She had five hours and twenty-seven minutes left according to the clock on the wall. How was she supposed to remain still for that long?

Sleeping wasn't an option because she couldn't sleep. She was much too nervous to sleep. Maybe she could find something on television to watch. At nearly 2 o'clock in the morning she might only find infomercials, but it was worth a try. Quickly figuring out how to work the buttons attached to the rails on her bed, Court switched on the television beginning to channel surf. Just as she had suspected, she found three infomercials. Two were for weight loss products and the other for a set of a dishware. She might have been inclined to purchase the dishware for Erin if she had her credit card handy. If she called within the next fifteen minutes she would receive a free wok.

Mmm, Chinese food, Court thought, the wok reminding her of it. *That sounds good*. Not too long ago, Erin had left to scrounge them up something to eat. Since the cafeteria had closed hours before, their choices were the hospital vending machine or to go in search of a restaurant or store that was open at this time of morning. Right before she left, Court's nurse allowed their friends to come in her room for a brief visit (five minutes). All of them felt that there was more to this than a bump on the head, so Erin and Court explained to them the real reason that she had been admitted into the hospital. Though there were some tears, the entire group was very encouraging and as always sweet. Court felt lucky to call them her friends. They were a fantastic bunch of women, including Nancy whom she just met at Keisha's party.

Everyone wanted to stay even if they couldn't be in the room until 8 o'clock, but the couple and Vicki insisted that they head home. After making them promise that they would call with the smallest bit of news, the group left. A few minutes ago, Court's phone started to ring. It was Keisha checking up on her and telling her to try to get some rest. Before they hung up, the ex-lawyer sang happy birthday to her, although Keisha had claimed at the party that she wouldn't officially be 40 until 11:49 a.m. (she was hanging on to 39 for as long as possible) While she sang, Court could hear that the other woman was softly crying and teased by saying that her voice wasn't *that* good.

Continuing through the channels, Court soon stopped in surprise. HBO! She had HBO! How awesome was this hospital that they had a major movie channel? Of course with it being 2 o'clock there was likely to be something on that young people shouldn't be viewing and at that moment two women were wrapped around each other like pretzels. Fascinated eyes watched, wondering how they managed to get in that position and shouldn't it be uncomfortable? Evidently it wasn't though. They seemed to be enjoying themselves based on the ecstatic faces and loud approving moans.

So involved was she with what the characters on screen were doing, that Court didn't notice when Erin entered the room. The brunette looked at the television in surprise before she started grinning. Quietly placing a bag on Court's tray she gazed at her.

"Ms. Tucker I had no idea that you were into those sorts of movies."

Jerking her head away from the screen, Court looked at her with an expression a child might have on after being caught rummaging through the gifts under a Christmas tree, before being given permission to open them. "Uh, hi. I um, ordinarily no, but there wasn't anything else on to watch..."

Erin resumed grinning. "I see. So you had no choice but to watch a dirty movie."

"Adult movie. Dirty sounds so bad."

Erin wiggled her brows. "Dirty can be so good."

Not responding to that comment, Court cleared her throat as she turned toward the right and switched off the television. Hearing the crinkling of a bag, she observed as her wife pulled out four silvery small rectangular bags from the larger plastic one. She knew what those shiny paper bags contained before detecting their aroma. Her mouth watered.

"Hotdogs! Did you get any," pausing, Court grinned while Erin showed her two bags of chips. "I have the coolest wife on the planet."

Pulling two cans of tea from the deep pockets of her jacket, Erin placed them on the tray with a smile. "The same goes for me. Of course, I won't be making out with *my* cool wife anytime soon because I know she prefers her hotdogs to be loaded with onions." Having found an all night 7-eleven nearby, Erin made her food purchases there.

Court pulled a warm hotdog from its sleeve. Before taking a huge bite out of it, she replied, "Your cool wife could always brush her teeth and then you could proceed with the make out session."

Sitting down on the bed, Erin munched on a bar-b-que flavored chip. "True. But you know to be honest, I would be willing to kiss her even with onion breath."

"Really?" Court pretended to look thoroughly amazed by the admission.

"Really." Erin ignored the part of her brain that warned her not to add, "I love her just that much." She was unprepared for her wife's response.

"She loves you too." The blonde grew concerned when a full minute passed by with Erin remaining silent the entire time. "Is something wrong?"

Erin shook her head in slow motion. "No, I just...I had no...I didn't know that you loved me. When you say love, how do you mean it? You love me as a friend?" She tried not to look crestfallen when Court admitted that she did.

"And I love you as my partner too. I'm 37 and this is the first time that I've ever romantically loved a woman. I knew that I could fall in love with you within minutes of meeting you at that bar."

Again Erin was struck speechless, but she recovered quicker that time. "Why didn't you mention this before? I asked you how you felt about me and you wouldn't give me an answer."

Court tossed the remainder of her first hotdog into her mouth and balled up its empty bag. She drank some of her tea to aid in swallowing. "I believed that I wouldn't be around much longer so what good would it have done to tell you that I loved you and that I wished to be with you in every way if it wouldn't last? I knew that my life would end soon."

"I don't understand why you married me then. You're not really writing a novel, are you?"

"No, I'm not." Court paused, her brow furrowed as she thought on how to answer. "Though I had accepted that I would die, I didn't want to be virtually alone during the time I had left. I've had many acquaintances over the years, but because I was busy with my career I hadn't developed any true friendships. In fact, before you and the girls the last set of friends I had was during my high school years. Even in college I was studying and working too hard to build solid friendships. So, basically I wanted a friend...a companion. And I chose you. Plus, I wanted someone to leave the majority of my assets to. I explained in my will that a certain amount would also go to a few charities that I listed."

"You married me to gain a friend that would inherit your money upon your...when you leave."

"Yes." Court brought the second hotdog to her mouth. Just as she bit into the soft bun Erin threw a piece of weenie at her. It struck the tip of her nose and then rolled onto the bed. Without missing a beat, she plucked the edible ammunition from the sheet and put it in her mouth. Looking at her wife, she spoke around a full mouth. "There are people starving in the world. Don't waste your food."

"What is it with you and money Court? You don't need to buy my friendship. I love you no matter what."

"I know, but I needed someone to put in my will."

"You don't have any other family members?"

"You know that I'm an only child and that my parents passed away. Though I do have living relatives, I'm not close to them."

"So you nabbed yourself a wife."

"I didn't intend to get married until about fifteen minutes before I proposed to you. It was one of those spur of the moment things."

When Court's nurse walked into the room, they paused their conversation while she checked her patient's blood pressure, pulse and the incision to make sure that it didn't have any signs of infection. Reminding Court to keep her leg straight, the nurse jotted information down on her chart before leaving. They decided to finish their meal before picking up where they left off.

Disposing their trash, Erin took a seat in a chair placed near the head of the hospital bed. She was about to say something when Court gently touched her mouth with two fingers. Understanding what she wanted, the younger woman refrained from speaking.

"I'm sorry Erin. The more I think about it, the more I realize how stupid a plan that was. I should have been honest with you from the beginning. It was wrong of me to keep this from you. I caused you such confusion and I hurt you, neither of which I intended. I told you that my mother died when I was twelve but I never told you how," Court paused, preparing herself to share the story that she had only repeated once in her life. "It was summertime so school was out. During summer vacation Mom would always have breakfast ready by 8:30 for the both of us. My Dad had to leave for work three hours before that, so she only had to cook breakfast for us on the weekdays.

"This particular Wednesday morning by the time I took a bath and put on my clothes I didn't smell anything cooking so I went to the kitchen and sure enough she hadn't started breakfast. It was nearly 8:30 then. I thought maybe she had slept in, which was unusual for her but that was the only explanation I could come up with. So I decided to make breakfast for a change and fixed what I'm best at--cereal.

"I carried our bowls of cereal along with orange juice on a tray to my parents' bedroom and knocked on the door. Since she didn't answer, I opened it and walked inside to find her snuggled under the covers. I tried to wake her up by calling out to her and tapping her shoulder but she wouldn't budge. By this time I knew that something had to be wrong and after finding the number I phoned our family doctor and he rushed over," stopping, Court closed her eyes, images of that fateful day running through her mind. She remembered every detail about it and often wished that her memory of the day she lost her mother wasn't quite so clear.

Squeezing the hand that had slipped around hers, she looked at Erin as she continued. "I refused to leave the room while he checked her. And then he told me that she was gone. I knew that she was before he said it--the expression on his face told me. We found out after the autopsy that she

had an aneurysm in her head. It must have ruptured while she slept. That was our only solace. Maybe she didn't feel anything."

Court's eyes glistened with tears. "Erin you could have found me like that. Keisha *did* find me passed out in her bathroom. What I did was so dumb and selfish."

"Sweetheart how is it selfish to want to feel close to someone? To want a friend?"

"When it's at your expense. I should have been straight with you. If I hadn't received a warning that the aneurysm was leaking it would have ruptured probably by next week and you might have been the person to find me if it happened at home. I would hate that. I know how it feels and I never should have gotten you into this."

"The day after we eloped in Vegas I wasn't aware of it, but you're the best thing in my life Courtney. I'm happy to have been gotten by you. Keeping this a secret was kinda dumb," Erin teasingly stated. "But I still love you. Don't worry about what could have happened. Let's just focus on getting you well."

Lifting Erin's hand to her lips, the blonde kissed it. "Keisha called while you were away and told me that I should get some sleep, so will you lay down with me for a while?"

Erin eyed the bed suspiciously. "You think we could both fit? I don't want you moving around with that leg."

"I think we can make it work."

Hyped up on coffee and adrenaline, Vicki walked to Court's room with a clipboard in her hand. It was 4:41 a.m. and she along with the assistance of the radiologist who performed the angiogram had finally come to a decision on the type of surgery her friend would have. Glancing through the partially open blinds that covered the window of Court's room, she smiled while momentarily watching the couple asleep in bed. Heading inside the room, Vicki kissed each woman's cheek.

"Wake up sleeping beauties," she said, watching as their eyes opened. When Court asked her what time it was and she told her, the older woman groaned.

"Do I really have to remain on my back for three more hours?" She had to urinate and there was no way that she would give in to using that bedpan. Though Court wasn't sure that she could control her bladder much longer.

Vicki grinned at her. "Yes, you do." Noticing Court's wiggling motion, the doctor leaned down and pulled a large pink plastic pan from underneath the bed and showed it to her. "Need to use this?"

"Nope."

Vicki shrugged as though it made her no difference. As Erin arose from the bed, Vicki slid the bedpan under the bed. "I'm suddenly so thirsty." Dropping her clipboard on the vacant chair behind her, she grabbed the pitcher of water on Court's tray and slowly poured it into the unused plastic cup. She snickered when Court explained to her just what a cruel person she was. "I'm cruel because I'm thirsty? That makes no sense whatsoever." Bringing the cup to her lips, Vicki took tiny sips. Hearing papers ruffling, she turned around. "Erin is there something that I can help with you?"

The brunette didn't look up from the clipboard now in her hands. Blue eyes scrolled over the words, trying to make some sense of them. It was like trying to decipher another language. "Do you deliberately make your handwriting this bad so no one else is able to read your notes? So far, the only words I've been able to make out are 'the' and 'a'. At least I think that's an a." Broadly smiling at her friend's resulting smirk, Erin handed the clipboard over.

"Dr. Lange?"

"Yes Ms. Calloway?" Vicki faced her patient as Erin perched on the edge of her bed. "Or is it Mrs. Tucker?"

Court beamed. "I respond to both."

"Okay, I'll alternate between them then."

Court chuckled. "Alright, you do that. What's the verdict?" She indicated the clipboard. "Please share with us what you have written there."

Sitting in the chair, Vicki began to tell them how she planned to treat the giant aneurysm located in Court's middle cerebral artery.

"Court, what you have is a giant serpentine aneurysm. Are you familiar with the term serpentine?" When the blonde informed her that she wasn't, Vicki continued. "Aneurysms usually have necks that can be clipped so blood will no longer circulate into it. Clipping is one of the preferred methods of treating aneurysms. However, serpentine aneurysms don't have a definable neck so clipping isn't an option. Also unlike other aneurysms that have a particular shape depending on the type of aneurysm they are, serpentine ones are...unpredictable. They have sinuous vascular channels with small branching channels attached. Basically, it's a giant tangled mass containing an abundance of small vessels."

"Are they common?"

"No, they aren't. Of all intracranial aneurysms, about 3-5% of them are serpentine. However, they are treatable. What I suggest is that you have what is called an EC-IC bypass followed by endovascular occlusion of the parent artery." As expected, Erin and Court stared at her with puzzled expressions.

"Um Doc, could you possibly put that in laymen terms?" Erin politely asked.

Smiling a little, Vicki nodded. "Of course. I intended to. The EC-IC bypass, EC standing for extracranial and IC for intracranial, is a procedure where the saphenous vein, which is a vein located in your leg is removed. One end of this vein is connected to the external carotid artery, which is in the side of your neck and the other is connected to a branch of your middle cerebral artery, where the aneurysm is. Following me so far?"

"Yes, but what exactly does an EC-IC bypass do?" Her patient inquired.

"It increases the flow of blood in your brain."

"That's a good thing."

The neurosurgeon chuckled as she shook her head in agreement. "Yes, a very good thing. Want me to tell you about the endovascular treatment now?"

"Please."

"Okay. At first, I thought you might have been a candidate for the clipping method, but after viewing the results of your angiogram and noticing that you had a serpentine aneurysm, I knew that we had to contain it with another procedure. So, that's where endovascular occlusion came in. What we'd do is use tiny platinum coils to fill the aneurysm and the parent artery. The procedure would be similar to the angiogram you had. These coils would be passed through a catheter, which is to be inserted through the femoral artery in your groin. The purpose of occluding the aneurysm and the parent artery is to prevent further growth of the aneurysm by obstructing blood flow into it, to abolish its large mass and those abnormal vascular channels. Also, occluding the parent artery might cause the aneurysm to shrink."

"So it isn't mandatory for me to have invasive surgery?"

"Coiling isn't referred to as a surgical procedure, but an EC-IC bypass is. After a certain area of your scalp is shaved, you'll need to have a craniotomy, where a part of your skull is removed," Vicki paused, noticing that her patient's face had visibly paled. Reaching over the railing, she caressed the nearest hand, careful not to disturb Court's IV. "Honey, I know that sounds extremely intrusive, but think of it this way. I'm merely going to open the door to your house for a little while so that I can redecorate the inside. When I'm done, I'll be sure to lock up before I leave. Is that better?"

Court slowly shook her head. And she thought she was nervous before! "I'm sorry Vicki, but not really," she admitted in a soft apologetic voice. "I realize that you're going to give it back, but knowing that a section of my skull will be temporarily missing from my head terrifies the crap out of me." Erin's hand beginning to rub up and down her leg through the sheet soothed her somewhat. "I'll be put to sleep right?"

"Absolutely honey. You won't feel a thing because we're gonna completely knock you out with a

general anesthesia." The redhead winked at Court, who smiled in relief. "When you awaken, it'll all be over."

"How long will both procedures take?"

"I don't want to give you a definite time because these types of procedures can be unpredictable. It might take my team and I several hours, but we'll take good care of you."

"When will you get started?" Erin asked her.

"That depends. Did you guys recently eat?" Vicki glanced at the petite woman in bed. "Court's breath is kicking like a football punter." She snickered.

Court scowled in her direction. "Hey! I take offense to that comment." She self-consciously covered her mouth with her palm.

"And I take offense to your breath." She snickered more.

Erin tried to keep from laughing. "I warned you about those onions." With a groan, Court pulled the sheet over her head, deciding to pout. Looking at her friend, Erin said, "To answer your question Vicki, we ate around 2:30 this morning. Does she have to wait a certain amount of time before having surgery?"

Peeking out from the sheet, green eyes studied the doctor, waiting for her reply.

"Yes, because she shouldn't have a full stomach while under the anesthesia. Clear liquids such as water are fine, but no food 6-8 hours before surgery. So," Vicki glanced at her watch, "why don't we schedule surgery for 10 o'clock?" Raising her clipboard, she made a quick note.

Court completely pulled the sheet from her head. "Wait. Ten o'clock, as in 10 o'clock this morning?" The doctor nodded. "No, not today."

"Why not today?" Erin and Vicki spoke in unison. At any other time, Court might have deemed that amusing.

"It's Keisha's birthday--her 40th birthday. That's important. I'll be turning 40 in a little over two years and I wouldn't want my partner spending my special day away from me."

Staring at her, Vicki raised an eyebrow. "Not even if it meant saving your friend's life? I think I've known Keisha long enough that I can reassure you that she will not have a problem with my spending the majority of tomorr--well today at the hospital if it means that I'm helping someone more important to her than her birthday. And if that doesn't pacify you, I still plan on celebrating with her. Tyrell, her sister and I were intending to take her out to dinner tonight and that hasn't changed. You'll be recovering here and if you need anything just page me or call my cell directly. Court you are not getting out of this operation."

"I'm not trying to," Court answered in a soft voice. "I just don't want Keisha to feel neglected. Her birthday *is* important."

"It is and she'll be fine. Actually, she wants to be here for the surgery. I insisted that she spend the day with Tamara but she said that she wouldn't be able to enjoy herself because she would be thinking about you. So she'll be in the waiting room because that is her choice." Pause. "You are not getting out of this operation," Vicki repeated with finality.

Thoughts racing through her mind, Court didn't immediately speak. Two pairs of eyes were watching her when she opened her mouth. "Still not today. I have other engagements."

"Other engagements?" The neurosurgeon looked like she wanted to throttle her. "What engagements could you possibly have that are more crucial than diminishing that prodigious aneurysm in your stubborn head before it explodes?"

"And you called my wife a drama queen!"

"Court!"

"All right, chill out." The blonde glanced between the two women standing near her bed. "Chill out--is that still hip? Is hip, hip?" Neither of them answered.

"Court, there is nothing that you need to do that cannot be put off until after your surgery," Erin told her.

"I would get down on one knee, but since I'm not allowed to move I'll have to do this in the bed." She reached for Erin's hand. "You barely remember our first wedding because of the alcohol and let's face it--it sucked. You saw the tape. Our witnesses were strangers to us--we were strangers to each other-- and the man who performed our wedding was dressed similarly to Elvis. We need to do this right. When I wake up in that recovery room I want you to be wearing a ring that didn't look like it came out of a cereal box. I want us to have professed our love in a sweet little service in front of friends and family members who felt jilted that we eloped in Vegas." Court briefly grinned. "So, what I'm trying to ask is, Mrs. Calloway will you remarry me today?"

"Sweetheart I would love to remarry you, but you need to have the surgery first."

"And I will. If Vicki isn't busy with other patients, the surgery can wait until Monday. I have faith that the aneurysm won't rupture before then." Court's eyes focused on the doctor. "Could we schedule my procedure for Monday morning?"

"Yes, but--"

"No buts allowed. This could be perfect. Before I leave here in a few hours to go ring shopping, I could probably make reservations at a nearby wedding chapel and reservations at a hotel restaurant that has a banquet room and available suites. That would be a combination wedding reception and celebration in honor of Keisha's birthday. Afterward, Erin and I could retire to the

suite I booked for the evening and we'll be here bright and early tomorrow morning so you can diminish the aneurysm in my stubborn head."

"Why are you trying to delay the inevitable?"

"I'm not. I simply want to remarry my wife before I go under the knife." Court gave a momentary pause. "No rhyme intended." She looked toward the brunette. "*Will* you remarry me today baby?"

"What do you think?" Erin inquired of her friend. "Do you think Court could wait another twenty-four hours before having surgery?"

Sighing, Vicki shrugged her shoulders. "It's a gamble, but if you crazy kids want to tie the knot again today count me in. The missus and I will be there." She smiled at them.

"And so will I."

Simultaneously, the three women looked toward the door where Alice Tucker stood. She looked a bit disheveled, which was unusual for her. A regular at the beauty salon, her always neatly arranged hairdo was pulled back into a haphazard ponytail and covered with a black baseball cap that had the name of her husband's mortgage company printed on the front. She wore a pair of black sweats and an oversized navy blue sweatshirt. Erin couldn't recall ever seeing her mother in sweats and a baseball cap. What was her mother doing there at five in the morning? How had she found them?

"Mom!" Erin stated with a surprised expression. "What...how did you know we were at the hospital?" She glanced at the doctor who quickly shook her head.

"I didn't tell her."

"Maggie told me," Alice answered while walking into the room. She looked at her daughter in disappointment. "Once again I had to find out such vital news from someone else. When were you planning to tell me about Courtney being in the hospital? Or were you intending to keep this a secret from your own mother?"

"Mom..."

"And what about the wedding? Would I have been included in that this time?" She shut her mouth to give Erin the opportunity to reply. A few seconds ticked by in silence. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I wasn't sure that you were finished with your barrage of questions." Her mother's eyes narrowed in warning. "Yes, I was going to tell you but I wanted to wait until a reasonable hour to call. Generally, people don't like receiving calls in the middle of the night. You automatically assume that something horrible happened."

Moving to the other side of the bed, Alice touched a hand to Court's cheek, her eyes remaining on Erin. "When it comes to the health of my children there is no such thing as a reasonable hour to call me. I don't care if I hadn't had a decent night's rest in a week. If something happened at 1:28 in the morning, I want to be told immediately. Don't call me after the sun has risen. Understand Erin?"

Erin felt successfully lectured. "I understand Mom. I'm sorry." She could barely detect Vicki's soft laughter.

"I'm doing just fine... Mom," Court said with a slight catch in her voice. She almost burst into tears when the older woman included her as one of her children. The words rolled off of Alice's tongue so easily, as though Court truly was one of her daughters. Court couldn't explain how good that made her feel. She had missed the maternal connection she shared with her mother and having Alice in her life helped to fill that void. "Don't worry. And please don't blame Erin. I wanted to wait a few more hours to call you."

Alice smiled, noting that Court had called her Mom. It was the first time she said it. "Are you sure you're all right? Are you any pain?"

"I'm sure and no I'm not. The nurse gave me something for my headache and I don't feel any pain. Tomorrow I'll have the surgery and then I'll be even better."

"Tomorrow--after the re-wedding."

"Yes, and you *are* invited to that."

"Yeah Mom, I wouldn't dare get married again without you," Erin interjected, winking at Alice. "I've learned my lesson."

Leaning across the bed, Alice gently pinched her cheek. "You better have. So," she quickly rubbed her hands together, a thoughtful expression on her face, "I have a wedding to plan. We don't have much time, but I can do this."

"Actually, Court already--"

"I heard what Courtney said and--"

"How much did you hear before you made your presence known?" Erin asked her. She was capable of interrupting too!

"Your wife was saying something about no butts being allowed--not sure that I want clarification on that. As for the wedding, I think that I should be in charge of it." Alice pointed toward herself and before they could object added, "The parents of the bride are supposed to pay for the wedding. You both are brides and Courtney by law and love you are my daughter, so that means Steven and I are supplying the funds."

Erin glanced toward the door. "Speaking of Dad, where is he?"

"I imagine that's he still sleeping."

"You didn't tell him about Court being in the hospital?"

"No, I did not. The phone rang, I hurriedly picked it up and your father didn't wake up the entire time I was on the phone. He's been working a lot and he needed his rest. Sunday is the only day he takes off. I'll tell him when I return home."

"So...I received a lecture for not calling you right away, but you don't feel obligated to tell Dad until he's adequately rested? You don't think he'll be concerned when he rolls over in bed to find that you're missing?"

Hands on her hips, Alice raised both eyebrows. "Do as I say, not as I do."

"Every parent must be required to say that. If you think about it, it's an unfair phrase."

The older woman shrugged. "Seven hours of labor to bring you into this world. Therefore, I've earned the right to use it. When you and Courtney have children, you may join the club."

Court and Vicki shared a laugh.

With not much time to plan it, Alice was correct. She could plan the wedding and she had the details all squared away by nine that morning. Court and Erin agreed that she had done a terrific job and for that reason were glad that they let (okay, so they didn't have much of a choice) her take over the arrangements.

The intimate service would take place at Alice and Steven's home in the Marina District, which happened to be one of the wealthiest districts in San Francisco. With Steven's profitable mortgage company, the couple could easily afford to live there and had for the past sixteen years. Their two-story home, which afforded a premium view of the San Francisco Bay, had five bedrooms and four baths. Within thirty feet of an Olympic sized pool in the back of the home lay a one-story guesthouse. Instead of renting a hotel suite for the night, that was where Court and Erin would stay. Both loved the idea. Although they would still be on Alice and Steven's property, residing in the guesthouse would give them privacy. Plus, the couple promised to let them enjoy their wedding night by not intruding until breakfast the next morning.

The small ceremony was to be performed at 4:00 by the Reverend Wendy Manning under a Victorian style gazebo in the garden area of the Tucker home. Those on the guest list were their dearest friends, as well as Nancy, Tamara, and Erin's immediate relatives. Receiving their invitations via the telephone, they were quite happy to hear of the impromptu wedding. After the ceremony, the party was to head into the main house where caterers would serve them dinner. Unbeknownst to anyone but them, Alice and Steven had bought gifts for the couple to be

remarried and Keisha since it was her birthday.

By 4:00 that afternoon, semi-formally dressed guests were seated in chairs placed about eight feet from the gazebo. Music recorded on a CD started to play as a wedding videographer captured first Alice walking Court down the short aisle and then Steven strolling along with his daughter, looking every bit the proud father. Ascending the three steps leading under the gazebo, Court and Erin stood before Reverend Manning who smiled at them both. Having practiced with them earlier, the reverend knew that they were ready to proceed with the ceremony. She detected a hint of nervousness from them, but that was normal. Even couples just renewing their vows were often somewhat nervous.

Looking out toward the small crowd, the early 40something reverend spoke in a rich voice that carried through the garden. "Welcome friends and family of Courtney and Erin. We have gathered here today to witness and celebrate in the joining of these two women, whose hearts and spirits are entwined as one. They have chosen to profess before us their intention to from this day forward walk the road of life united.

"We are thankful for the miracle of love and that Courtney and Erin's hearts have been brought together as one with love. Love is patient and love is kind. Love is not jealous nor is it boastful. It isn't proud or self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It does not rejoice in wrongs, but rejoices in the rights. Love believes all things and endures all things. Love never ends. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

"On this day, you are here to start the weave of your lives together with the golden threads of love, hope, and commitment. On this day you both will make a promise to share not only the happy moments, but sad ones as well. You will promise to share life's joys and sorrows and its riches and hardships. Your commitment is to each other, to be partners in life, helping each other to be stronger, wiser and a best friend."

Glancing between the couple, the reverend asked, "Courtney and Erin, are you now ready to seal your lifelong commitment to one another?" After hearing two softly uttered yes's, she continued while looking toward Courtney. "Courtney, do you take Erin to be your partner in life? To love, honor and cherish her through sickness and in health, through good times and bad for as long as you both shall live?"

Her eyes on the glowing brunette a foot away from her, Court smiled as she said, "I do."

"And Erin, do you take Courtney to be your partner in life? To love, honor and cherish her through sickness and in health, through good times and bad for as long as you both shall live?"

Returning her beloved's smile, Erin spoke. "I do too."

"Terrific," Reverend Manning stated. "At this time you may share your personalized vows with each other. Courtney, you can go first."

"Okay." Taking the deepest breath of her life, Court fully focused on her bride. "Erin, I never

realized what loving someone could feel like until I met you. I could never repay you for all the joy you have brought to my life. You've given me so much--comfort, faith, tenderness and the greatest gift of all, your love. For at least the next fifty-five years I intend to show you everyday how much I love you and how much you mean to me. I promise to give and receive, to honor and respect, to care for and console you, and to share every facet of my life with you. Today I ask you to be my eternal mate because you are my angel, my lover, and my best friend." Tears falling down her face, she whispered, "I love you and I always will."

Feeling as though she might actually burst with love for Court, Erin pulled the smaller woman to her, hugging her tight as she whispered an 'I love you' into a delicate earlobe. A few of their guests had begun to silently weep as Erin released Court and quickly prepared herself to speak her own vows.

"Court, you have brought me the truest happiness I have ever known. You have captured my heart and I would be the luckiest woman on earth if you kept it forever. Court, when you need strength you can count on me to freely give you mine. When you need words of encouragement, I will always listen and offer you my support. I pledge to be open, honest, and faithful to you. I pledge to love you when we are together and on those occasions when we are apart, when life is peaceful and when it is in disorder. I give you all of my trust, all of my tomorrows and all of my life. I love you today and with every day that passes my love you for you will grow stronger. Thank you for loving me and for giving me the opportunity to love you for the rest of my days."

The reverend beamed at the obviously joyful couple before looking toward the shortest guest at the ceremony. She was seated in the front row holding a small silk pillow in her lap, waiting for Reverend Manning to ask her to come forward with it. Being two years and five months old, this was her first job and she took it very seriously. She wanted to make her Auntie Erin and Auntie Court proud on their special day.

When the reverend asked her to bring the rings over, Katie arose from her chair and carefully walked toward the gazebo where she was met at the first stair. After placing the pillow in the officiant's hands and graciously accepting a 'you look so pretty' from her new Auntie Court and a kiss from her favorite and only Auntie Erin, the child headed back to reclaim her seat next to her parents.

Court and Erin each selecting the ring that belonged to the other, Reverend Manning set the pillow on a stand. "Throughout the world, rings are known as a sign of eternity because as circles they haven't a beginning or an ending. These rings are a symbol of your pure love and promises, which you share together as partners in life." Looking at Court, she asked the woman to repeat her words.

Most of the time they were in the jewelry store earlier that day wasn't spent fussing over what wedding rings they wanted, but who would pay for them. Finally acknowledging that Erin wasn't going to allow her to be the sole purchaser, Court mentioned that they could each pay half. Deliberating the idea for a few seconds, Erin then agreed.

So slipping her half of the price on the brunette's left hand, she said, "Erin, with all my love and

for everyone to witness, I have chosen you as my partner in life. It is my heart's desire to be with you throughout my life, and I shall love you always."

Erin placed a ring smaller than her own on Court's finger. "Court, with all my love and for everyone to witness, I have chosen you as my partner in life. It is my heart's desire to be with you throughout my life, and I shall love you always."

"May this day shine eternally in your lives," Reverend Manning started, speaking directly to the couple. "May it add brilliance to every achievement and cast a divine light over any misfortune. May you care for each other in all sadness. May you give cheer to each other. May you give vitality to each other in all undertakings. May all that is virtuous, beautiful and honest, remain with you always." Her eyes moving over the guests, a bright smile on her face, the reverend exultantly added, "Friends and family, I would like to present to you Courtney and Erin Tucker-Calloway. Court and Erin, it is my honor to pronounce you soul mates and partners in life." The reverend's smile grew. This was one of the best parts of weddings and vow renewals. "Now give us a little kiss."

Wasting no time in doing what Reverend Manning said, Court cupped her bride's cheeks moments before their lips touched for the first time, unless one chose to count the brief alcohol laced kiss shared at their original ceremony. This was much better. It was sweeter, tender and filled with love. Both wished it to be the first of many more to come.

Having bid everyone, including their parents a good night, Court and Erin headed to the guesthouse with their fingers intertwined. The surgery was scheduled for ten the following morning and Vicki wanted them to arrive by eight-thirty, so they roughly had the next twelve hours to themselves.

Twelve whole hours, Court thought as Erin disengaged her hand in order to unlock the door. That was a lot of time to kill. What could a couple of newlyweds possibly do within that amount of time on their wedding night all alone in a guesthouse? Silly question. Most of them would do the obvious and though Court was extremely willing to delve into the obvious, at the same time it terrified her. This was strange because she had never been terrified before--even during her first time. So what was the difference in this case?

Oh, yes. She was in love.

As she followed Erin inside the house, all sorts of questions popped into her head. What if Erin didn't respond to her? What if she was disappointed after waiting all these weeks? What if Court couldn't perform because she was preoccupied with thoughts of her impending surgery? Her musings crashed to a halt as she watched the taller woman's skirt covered backside provocatively swing from right to left while she walked into what Court presumed to be the bedroom.

Okay, that last thought wasn't likely to come true.

Stepping out of her shoes, Court practically skipped into the bedroom where she found her wife pouring an amber colored liquid into two crystal flutes. Smiling at her, Erin handed her a flute. Wordlessly, they touched their glasses before sipping. Though it wasn't champagne, it was tasty. Alice and Steven had left them a chilled bottle of apple cider with a small red bow tied around the neck of it. Aw, what a romantic and sweet gesture.

Court grinned. "I guess there's no further reason for me to try getting you drunk so apple cider is a fine beverage."

Setting hers and Court's flute down on the dresser, Erin wrapped her arms around the blonde's waist. "No, you've got me. I'm yours for as long as you want."

Court gazed into those blue eyes that she hoped to awaken to every morning. It occurred to her that they were such an amazing shade of blue. Crayola would be envious of that color because they could never create a crayon exactly like it. "I want forever," she whispered. "Could I have forever?" Her eyes moved down to those lips. She wanted to explore them. She wanted to explore every part of Erin.

"Yes you can Mrs. Tucker." Wearing a smile, Erin captured her love's mouth, slowly sliding her tongue between her lips. Never having met before, their tongues greeted each other as the two women moved in the direction of the bed.

Slipping her hands underneath the nearly knee-length skirt and sliding them along the backs of her wife's thighs, Court's fingers touched the edge of lacy panties. Slowly, she drew imaginary circles on Erin's thighs before cupping her bottom. Gently squeezing, she was rewarded with a moan that vibrated against her mouth. Playfully nipping at her bottom lip, Erin undid the buttons on Court's silk white shirt.

"I've wanted to be with you for weeks," she admitted while removing the shirt, letting it drop from her hand.

Court teasingly grinned. "I could tell. Who wouldn't?" As if she thought that they were playing follow the leader, she delayed Erin's response by deftly pulling her blouse over her head. Now they both stood at the end of the bed in their bras. Court admired her wife's bra. It was the prettiest one she had ever seen. In fact, it was so pretty that she yearned to take it off.

"There's more of that endearing modesty."

"Too modest for my own good." Smiling, Court kissed her. "Seriously, I've wanted to be with you too baby." Cupping her cheek, she reverently looked into Erin's eyes. "I love you so much. I've never felt such an incredible emotion as I do at this moment and I have you to thank for that. These last few weeks with you have been amazing. Actually, ten times better than amazing."

Erin swallowed around the knot, which had just quickly formed in her throat. Turning her head to the left, she kissed her partner's palm. "I love you too Court. And you know what?"

"No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me," she answered, green eyes twinkling in merriment.

"*You're* ten times better than amazing." Sealing the space between them, she found the blonde's lips again as her hands stroked the small of her back. Their tongues caressed and tasted for a few minutes before Erin decided that she had to sample other areas, her mouth trailing kisses from Court's chin down her neck and to the valley of her breasts. While the other woman moaned her pleasure, Erin dipped her tongue in and out of the chasm created by the bra as her fingers unhooked the back of it. Dropping the bra on top of the shirt, her mouth kissed left a damp circular trail, unhurriedly making its way toward the center.

Just as she reached Court's taut nipple, she blew her warm breath on it and moved to the other breast to repeat her kissing pattern. She flashed a mischievous grin when Court mewled in frustration. Arriving at a rosy areola, she brushed her lips across a nipple before sliding the tip of her tongue around it. Involuntarily placing a hand on the back of a dark head, Court released a louder moan when Erin drew the engorged tip into her mouth, suckling it in delight. Cool air immediately struck the nipple when Erin released it so that she could revisit its twin. Her legs starting to quiver, Court hoped that she wouldn't fall.

Kicking her shoes off, Erin kneeled on the carpet just as her lips connected with a smooth warm belly, depositing kisses all over it. Winking up at Court, she unbuckled the older woman's belt and removed it from around her waist. Wanting to taste a small bellybutton, she did so while slipping out the button and lowering the zipper, which aided in keeping Court's pants up. They were a hindrance now, concealing what Erin craved to touch and feel.

Within moments, the brunette successfully had the black slacks and the boxer briefs beneath them pooled around Court's ankles. Massaging strong thighs, she licked and kissed her way along the inner regions of them, steadily heading toward the treasure.

Her hands slipping up to rest on Court's waist, she brought her face closer to the golden thatch of curls between her legs breathing in her wife's alluring scent. Her mouth practically watered as Erin lightly nuzzled her mouth against the curls, evidence of Court's arousal smearing on her lips. Her tongue darting out to clean them, Erin softly moaned at the taste. She wanted more.

A gentle hand brushing through her hair and a quietly uttered please were the only encouragement Erin needed to continue. She felt Court's body shiver as she grazed her swollen labia with her tongue, rhythmically stroking up and down. Both women moaned when her tongue fully introduced itself by leisurely slipping inside, tasting more of Court's natural sweetness. After breathily announcing that she was on the verge of collapsing, the blonde made it to the edge of the bed with her partner's help. She found it remarkable that Erin's tongue stayed with her the entire time, as though it was permanently attached. However, upon arrival, Erin lifted her head in order to completely pull the pants and underwear from her lover's body.

Bringing Court's legs over her broad shoulders, Erin continued to explore her treasure, dipping her tongue in and out of it as the hips beneath her hands started moving. It didn't take much longer before Court's hand urgently began pressing on the back of her head, her hips traveling away from the bed to meet the thrusting of the brunette's tongue. As if the sensations pulsing

through her already weren't strong enough, warm palms caressed her belly before covering her breasts, fingers tweaking her erect nipples.

Throwing her head back, Court cried out when her wife's exquisite tongue finally wrapped around the bundle of nerves that had been throbbing for attention. Her hips bucked while Erin lovingly devoured her, sucking, licking and drinking her essence. Her entire body shook, hips moving more urgently as she toppled over that proverbial peak, calling out Erin's name again and again, like she thought she was in danger of forgetting it.

Though she was barely moving her tongue now, Erin kept it pressed against Court until the blonde indicated for her to raise her head. When she did so, a mouth heatedly kissed her, a tongue thrusting between her lips seeking out hers. She moaned as Court gently sucked on the wet organ, her fingers dancing along the sweat dampened nape of Erin's neck. Kissing her way to the brunette's ear, she gently sucked the lobe into her mouth before softly asking her to retrieve the abandoned flute of apple cider from the dresser.

Rising from the floor, Erin strolled over toward the dresser. Her fingers had barely wrapped around the glass before she found herself wrapped in Court's embrace. Softly smiling as she glanced into the mirror affixed to the wall that the dresser rested against, she watched as the petite woman pressed against her from behind started kissing the back and sides of her neck. Hands slid up her bare stomach to cup her confined breasts. When they squeezed she moaned in pleasure.

"I take it you don't really want the apple cider?" Erin asked in a whisper. She groaned when Court lightly pinched her nipples through the bra.

Briefly removing her mouth from her wife's neck, Court huskily replied, "No, I only want you." Thinking that Erin was overdressed, she worked on releasing her from the undergarment while continuing to speak. "I'd like you to watch while I make love to you. I want to watch your face." Her eyes connected with Erin's through the mirror as she revealed the full breasts beneath the now discarded bra. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are Erin?"

The brunette smiled a little shyly at Court's reflection. "Look who's talking." She gasped as Court's hands returned to her breasts, expertly kneading them. Turning her head to the side, she captured her lips, their tongues starting a lingering dance while a pair of dainty hands traveled to her waist. Once Court had the zipper of Erin's skirt unfastened, she pushed the article of clothing down her hips. Breaking the kiss, she brushed her lips along her wife's spine until she rested on her knees, eyelevel with lacy panties. Within seconds she had them off, trailing her mouth over the exposed cheeks.

Inhaling Erin's potent scent, Court moaned in anticipation of being inside her. Standing, she winked at her lover's image as she pressed the palm of her hand against her womanhood. As Court's hand grinded against her, Erin moaned while pushing her buttocks back into her, causing the blonde's center to further dampen.

"More," Erin whispered, her eyelids half closed.

Flicking her tongue along the ridge of Erin's ear, Court answered, "More what baby?" Two fingers lightly stroked swollen lips, instantly being coated with the thick substance covering them.

The brunette squirmed against her. "Come inside me," Erin implored. "I need you inside me."

Bringing her index and middle finger to her mouth, Court sucked them clean before returning them to the place that her wife needed her and where she wanted to be. While their bodies rocked in tandem, Erin felt the two digits that had been teasing moments ago, smoothly sink within her. Thrusting fingers stoked the growing blaze inside her as Court's mouth journeyed back to her neck, sucking and drawing the skin between her teeth. Her free hand gave attention to Erin's bouncing breasts, taking time to caress each one.

Twin moans sailed into the air as Court plunged fingers sheathed within her love's warmth, deeper. Clutching the edge of the dresser, Erin positively purred when a thumb began to manipulate her engorged bud, sweeping across it. While Court wrapped an arm around her middle, the speed of Erin's swinging hips increased along with the blonde's digits. The couple's eyes fastened via the mirror just as the taller of the two felt the telltale tingling in her lower body, which signaled an orgasm was quickly approaching.

One more thrust was all it took for Erin to explode, her rear grinding against Court as she trembled with the intensity of her climax. Their mouths collided, Court continuing to stroke her wife's damp folds and garnering small aftershocks because of it. When she removed her hand seconds later, Erin turned around, throwing her arms around the petite frame and soundly kissing lips that she had quickly become addicted to. Bringing her hands lower, she rested them on her bottom as she smiled tenderly.

"I love you." Pausing, Erin blinked back tears. "I could never say that enough."

One stubborn tear fell and noticing it, Court reached up to wipe it away. "I'm sweet on you too Mrs. Calloway." A smile curving her lips, she took the other woman by the hand and led her toward their bed.

After pulling back the covers, the two slipped beneath them, immediately seeking out one another. Entwining their limbs, they shared a few more kisses and soothing touches before fatigue got the better of them.

Upon awakening, the first thing Erin detected was that the main source of her warmth was missing. Since it was still dark, she reached over and turned on the lamp. Her eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness, she then searched the room for her partner. Thinking that she might have been in the bathroom, Erin turned toward the door, noticing that the light wasn't shining underneath it. Unless Court was using the bathroom in the dark, she had to be in the front of the guesthouse.

Climbing out of the bed, the brunette slipped on a robe before exiting the bedroom. Though a light had been switched on in the living room, there was no sign of Court there or in the small kitchen. Heading back into the bedroom for slippers, Erin then walked outside, calling out her wife's name as she stood a few feet from the undisturbed pool. Court responded the first time Erin shouted her name. However, the brunette had yet to discover where she was.

"Where are you?"

"Up here."

Up? Erin's face etched in confusion. "Up where?"

"Up...here." Court's voice sounded a bit teasing.

The brunette smirked, although she couldn't be certain that the other woman spotted it. "Where is up here? Are you throwing your voice?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"So where are you?"

"I'll give you hint." Surprising her wife by doing and actually being pretty good at it, Court started to sing.

*When I come home feeling tired and beat
I go up where the air is fresh and sweet
I get away from the hustling crowds
And all that rat race noise down in the street*

*On the _____'s the only place I know
Where you just have to wish to make it so
Let's go up on the _____*

*At night the stars put on a show for free
And darling you can share it all with me...*

The biggest smile on her face, Erin looked toward the top of the guesthouse, having figured out that Court was there during the second line. "Roof!" She triumphantly stated, her eyes on the grinning blonde looking down at her. "And what a lovely voice you have!"

"Thank you baby. *Will* you share it all with me?"

"Uh, how did you get up on the roof?"

"I don't know where your parents--"

"Ahem."

"Excuse me. I don't know where our parents' ladder is kept. That's if they even have one, so that contraption over there," Court pointed to a chair strategically placed next to a patio table, which held another chair on top of it, "is how I got up on the roof. Go on and try it. I doubt it'll collapse on you."

Erin quickly raised an eyebrow. "You doubt? Doubts aren't assurances sweetheart. I'll be right back." Soon she returned with a genuine ladder, hearing her wife's chuckles as she set it up. Climbing up and at the same time trying not to dwell on the fact that the higher she traveled the more space there was between herself and the comforting ground, Erin safely made it to the roof's surface.

Her only covering being the short robe she wore, Erin scooted under the big blanket surrounding Court when the older woman opened it for her. When asked why she decided to climb on the roof, the blonde pointed toward the illuminated Golden Gate Bridge and then toward the sky where seemingly hundreds of stars shone. Erin had to agree that they were provided with an incredible view.

Slipping an arm around Court's waist, which was covered with an oversized nightshirt, Erin tenderly kissed her cheek, causing her to beam. "What happened? You couldn't sleep?"

Staring toward the bridge, Court shook her head. "I managed to sleep a few hours, but then this nagging headache woke me up."

Erin pressed her lips to her temple. "I'm sorry sweetheart. In about six hours we'll get that taken care of so that you'll be able to get a good night's sleep. In the morning I'll be the one awakening you to make the sweetest love to you."

Court smiled again, though it seemed as though she had something on her mind. "I'd like that baby."

"Something else bothering you?"

With a loud exhale, Court looked down at the blanket, not really noticing its pattern. "I um..." Though she wasn't cold, her body started to shake as she began to cry. As though a dam had broken, tears freely flowed down her face. Raising her head, she looked at her partner, whose heart was aching for her. "I've never been so afraid in my life," Court shakily whispered. "I'm so afraid that I'm gonna go under that anesthesia and that I'll never wake up again. I'm afraid that I won't see you again. I don't want to die. God, Erin I don't want to die!"

Erin shifted their cover enough to be able to pull Court into her arms. The smaller woman continued to sob uncontrollably. "Court, everything is going to work out fine. You have to believe that love. You're not going anywhere anytime soon. You're strong and because of that you will make it through this. There's not a single doubt my mind." While rubbing her wife's

back, she added, "Plus, you have an excellent, skilled team of doctors--namely Vicki. She's a remarkable surgeon, and I'm not just saying that because she's my best friend." She kissed the crook of Court's neck. "Sweetheart, don't worry."

Court pressed her forehead to Erin's. Her eyes closed, she fervently whispered, "I'd accepted the fact that I was going to die before I met you, but now I can't bare the idea that this might be my last night with you. I can't bare the thought that I might leave you."

Tears blurring her vision, Erin cupped her wife's face in her hands. "Courtney Calloway, you listen to me." She paused until the other woman was actually looking at her. "My plan is for you and I to learn a whole lot more about each other, fall even deeper in love and then perhaps someday if we agree that we want to we'll have ourselves some rugrats." That last comment caused the sniffling blonde to softly chuckle. "We'll raise them and when they're adults they might be inclined to give us some grandchildren to spoil. Eventually, you and I will be old and gray, living in one of those ritzy retirement communities enjoying our golden years together. My point is, you're stuck with me for the next sixty years at least."

Court chuckled again. "You think I'll make it to 97?"

Erin appeared thoughtful. "Ah, we might as well make that an even 100. Then our children, grandchildren and I can throw you a slamming birthday party."

"I'll be sure to wear my dentures so I can eat the cake."

"The cake will be soft. You won't need your dentures."

"Are we going to take pictures?"

"Of course. We'll put the entire event on video too. By then camcorders will probably be about the size of my thumb. Inside it there's this tiny microchip that holds all the footage."

"Who would want a camcorder that small? You could easily lose it. And there's no telling how much a little thing like that would cost."

"Okay. Maybe it's a bad idea."

Court grinned at her. "Anyway, since we are going to be taking pictures and recording it on film, I should wear my dentures. The last thing I'd want is for a camera to catch me with a mouth full of gums."

"You're gonna let that bother you at your 100th birthday bash?"

A blonde head nodded. "Yes. At 100 I'll most likely be even more stunning than I am now, so I must look my best for the camera." Her grin increased.

Erin grinned back. "I see that my modest girl has returned."

Leaning toward her, Court softly kissed her lips. "Actually, at 94 years of age I just know that you're going to be the most stunning person at that party. I'm going to be the envy of our friends because I'm lucky enough to be with you."

Her wife blushed. "You're such a sweet talker." Apparently liking sweet talkers, she proceeded to kiss Court senseless.

Court watched the clock so much that surely it would have been either annoyed or paranoid by the abundance of attention she paid it if it had any feelings. It was almost time for her procedure. Thirty minutes ago, her visit with she and her wife's friends had ended when they were instructed to go to the waiting room. All of them had taken off of work today so that they could be at the hospital. Tyrell had wanted to come along as well, but his mothers insisted that he go to school first. Afterwards, Keisha promised to pick him up and bring him to the hospital.

Court couldn't stop herself from bursting into tears when the small group walked into her room, carrying colorful arrays of flowers and uplifting greeting cards. She spent the first few minutes they were there, reminding them what incredibly wonderful people they were. By the time she was finished, everyone had shed some tears.

Currently, she was lying in a hospital bed with a fresh IV attached to her hand. Erin sat next to her bed reading a magazine. However, Court had her doubts that the younger woman was truly reading since her eyes had been glued to the same page for the past five minutes and that was an ad for a feminine hygiene product.

"Thinking hard about buying some Kotex pads?" The blonde teasingly inquired, trying to alleviate some of the nervous tension in the air. "I'm personally a fan of Always products. Always rocks...always."

Laughing, Erin looked at her as she closed the magazine. "That's good to know. Now I'm aware of what to buy you during that time of the month."

Knocking on the door to let the couple know that she was coming in, Court's nurse walked in with a syringe in her hand and a cheery smile on her perky countenance. Approaching the bed, she showed Court the syringe while informing her that what it contained might make her a little happy.

"What do you have there?" The blonde asked while trying to keep her eyes from straying to Mandy's ample chest. If the substance she were wielding failed to succeed in causing a patient to become happy, surely those breasts combined with her vivacious personality would do the trick. Court felt a little guilty, but even covered with a shirt they were so prominent! Most people, gay or straight would probably give Mandy's chest a second glance.

"This is a sedative. It won't put you to sleep but it should relax you." The nurse smiled at her. "I

can tell just by looking at you, that you're as tense as a stretched rubber band. So I'll just put this in your IV, okay?"

Nodding, Court offered her hand. After uncapping it, Mandy inserted the needle into the IV line and slowly pressed the plunger until she emptied the contents of the syringe. "Okay, that ought to do it sweetness." Removing it, she gently patted Court's cheek, smiled at both women and then left the room.

Erin grinned knowingly. "I think she has a crush on you."

"Who?"

"Nurse Boobs."

Court laughed. "So you noticed."

"How could I not? Quite a pair she has."

"Mm, indeed."

"I think you might have a crush on her too," Erin said with a smile on her face. "At least a crush on her assets."

The sedative starting to kick in, Court languidly shrugged her shoulders as she spoke in a quieter tone of voice. "I have to admit that I'm an assets woman." One corner of her mouth lifted into a smile. "You have nice assets."

"Thank you for noticing." Pausing, she observed the blonde a moment. "Are we feeling calmer now?"

"Yep. We still aren't excited by Dr. Vicki temporarily removing a piece of our skull, but the thought of that isn't as terrifying as it was just before Nurse Boo--Mandy gave us the injection. We feel a little better now."

Slipping her hand into her wife's, Erin raised and kissed the back of it. "I'm glad to hear it."

Less than ten minutes later dressed in their scrubs, Vicki and Lisa the radiologist who performed Court's angiogram entered the room announcing that it was time to go. The two women began to push Court's hospital bed out of the room with Erin following. Once they were near the OR, it was against policy for Erin to go any further, so Vicki and Lisa stepped away so that she and her wife could talk in private.

"I'll see you in a little while sweetheart." Smiling, the brunette leaned down and softly kissed her lips. She was about to rise when arms wrapped around her neck and a mouth drew her in for a more thorough kiss. Happy to oblige, Erin melted into the kiss, only stopping when the neurosurgeon and radiologist whistled their admiration. Looking at the two, she playfully rolled

her eyes before returning her attention to Court.

Clutching her hand, Court gazed into her eyes. "Before I go, I want you to know that I love you and that--"

"I love you too." Erin quickly cut her off, not wanting to hear the rest of what she was about to say. "Anything else you might want to tell me can wait until after your procedure."

"Erin..."

"After your procedure." Giving Court's hand a squeeze, she asked, "Want me to have you a couple of hotdogs waiting when you wake up?"

The blonde slowly grinned. "With onions?"

Erin nodded. "Just the way you like it. I'll even throw in a couple of breath mints."

Despite her anxiousness at what was about to take place, that made Court laugh. "You're so good to me."

"I learn from the best."

Sharing one final kiss, the couple let Vicki and Lisa know that they were done. Reluctantly letting go of each other's hand, Erin stood watching as her friend and the radiologist rolled Court further down the quiet corridor and inside a set of double doors. Releasing a heavy sigh, she was about to turn around and head toward the waiting room where her parents and other friends were when Vicki walked back through the double doors. Approaching Erin, she hugged the taller woman tightly and pecked her cheek. Hugging her back, the brunette tried not to cry, but the tears leaked anyway.

The EC-IC bypass surgery had been a success. That was what the radiologist had left the OR to inform Erin close to an hour and a half ago. She had promised to keep Erin posted on the coil embolization procedure. Obviously, she didn't have any news to report yet since she hadn't returned.

Lifting the paper cup to her mouth, she drained the rest of the dark brown substance inside. Taking everyone's order, Adriana and Toni had gone to a nearby coffeehouse a little while ago. Not wanting anything to eat although her mother insisted that she should, Erin merely asked for a tall coffee--decaffeinated coffee since she was wired enough. Tossing her empty cup in the trash bin, she sat back in her seat and pretended to read her magazine. Slipping Court's wedding ring from her pocket, she ran her thumb across the gold band's tiny etchings. *I can't wait to put this back on your finger where it belongs love.*

The waiting room was quiet because everyone inside of it was utilizing the passing time in some

way other than talking to each other. Alice was knitting a pair of small booties--a not so subtle hint that she expected to have more grandchildren. Her husband Steven sat next to her reading the financial section of the newspaper. Sitting on Erin's right, Keisha started on the fourth chapter of a slightly used romance novel she bought at the hospital's gift shop for a dollar twenty-five. Adriana listened to music on her CD player through a set of earphones while she nibbled on a pastry she purchased from the coffeehouse. And Toni read a magazine while occasionally watching Lindsay use the coffee table for playing solitaire. Earlier the two had played poker, but Toni quit after losing all of her change.

Fifteen minutes passed before Erin decided to take a short walk. Letting everyone know that she wouldn't be far away, she rose from her seat, stretched and headed out of the waiting room, almost colliding with a frazzled looking radiologist.

"Lisa! How is Court doing?"

She glanced into the room. Every ear in there was listening to them intently. "Erin would you follow me down the hall? I'd like to talk with you in private," Lisa quietly stated.

Her stomach twisting into knots, the brunette nodded beginning to follow the other woman. Turning around a corner, Lisa led her into an unused hospital room. Sitting in chairs facing each other, Erin then repeated her inquiry about her wife.

"Erin, during the coiling procedure the aneurysm ruptured. We were aware of there being a risk of that happening due to it already having begun to leak and because of its size. Right now Dr. Lange and another neurosurgeon are working on stopping more blood from suffusing the space around Court's brain." Noticing that Erin's eyes had started to fill with water, Lisa found a tissue for her in the slim box next to the bed. "Honey, we're doing all that we can to repair the damage."

As though she were in a daze, Erin slowly shook her head, tears spilling down her face. "Is she going to be alright?" She asked, her voice barely audible.

The radiologist hesitated just long enough for Erin to notice it. Seeing that frightened her more than she already was. "Erin, it's not possible at this time for me to give you a definite answer. It ruptured not too long ago and I don't have enough information."

She didn't want to ask, but she had to know. "What are her chances of surviving this with no complications?"

That information Lisa could supply, but she didn't relish doing so. "There is a 50% chance that she won't survive and if she does there's about a 15-50% chance that she'll have permanent brain damage and disabilities."

Rocking back and forth in the chair, Erin quickly nodded. "Which also means that there is a 50% chance she'll survive and do so without any lifelong disabilities." She didn't look as positive as she tried to sound.

"That's correct." Reaching over, the radiologist covered her knee and squeezed. "Erin, there have been numerous cases of people with ruptured aneurysms surviving. A rupture is an obstacle, but it's possible to get passed it."

"I know."

"I should get back to the OR. You want me to escort you back to the waiting room?"

"No, thanks. I'd like to stay here for a little and then I'll go tell everyone the latest."

Nodding, Lisa stood. "When I learn more I'll let you know, okay?"

Watery blue eyes looked up at her as Erin pasted on her best imitation of a smile. "Okay. Thank you Lisa. Please take care of my girl."

"You've got it." Opening the door, Lisa spied Lindsay crouched on the floor pretending to tie her shoe. Rounding the corner was Erin's mother, who immediately inquired of Court's condition just after the radiologist closed the door. "I'm not allowed to--"

Alice waved her hand dismissively. "I'm her mother therefore I have a right to know how she is fairing."

"Mother...in law."

Still kneeling on the floor, Lindsay's eyes widened comically. *Oh, man. You should never argue with Alice Tucker.*

"That in law part doesn't mean a damn thing to me young lady. Blood or no blood Courtney is my daughter." Alice rarely cried, but her eyes were brimming with tears. "I love her and I'm worried about her just like a mother would. So I would appreciate you telling me what you told my other daughter who I assume is sitting behind that door in God only knows what state. Please tell me."

Promptly learning that she definitely shouldn't argue with Alice Tucker, the radiologist briefed them with everything that Erin knew before she left to return to the OR. Because everyone was waiting on pins and needles for them to return, it was decided that Lindsay would go speak with them while Alice would check on her daughter. After she disappeared around the corner, the tall blonde knocked on the door. When Erin didn't say anything, she opened it and stepped inside. There she found her sobbing with her hands covering her face.

"Oh, Erin," Alice softly intoned as she wrapped her daughter in her arms.

"I'm not hungry. Really I'm not," Erin argued with her friends. They were about to take a trip to the cafeteria and were insisting that she order something, but Erin truly wasn't in the mood to eat.

She was thinking and worrying way too much about her wife to consider food. Two hours later she was still in surgery.

Lindsay gave her a disapproving look. "You need to get some food in your belly. How are ya gonna be strong for Court if your weak from malnutrition?" Not waiting for answer, she continued to speak. "Now I'm gonna get you a sandwich and you better eat it too. I'll cut ya a deal. At least eat half of it, 'kay?"

"Alright. It's a deal."

Lindsay smiled. "Good. What kind?"

"Turkey please."

Within minutes, Erin had the waiting room all to herself since everyone minus Keisha who had left to pick up Tyrell, went to the cafeteria. Needing something to keep her occupied, the brunette grabbed Lindsay's deck of cards and started to shuffle them several times.

"What are you about to play?"

Dropping the cards onto the coffee table, Erin looked over shoulder seeing the last person she intended to. "Michelle," she said, her voice filled with surprise. "What are you doing here?" A second after asking, she noticed the flowers and small brown teddy bear holding a sign that read 'Get Well Soon'. She didn't have to ask how her ex found out about Court. Undoubtedly, Toni's mother had something to do with it.

Walking into the room, Michelle sat next to her. "I heard about Court and wanted to see how you both were doing." She indicated the flowers and bear. "I brought these for her."

Erin managed a smile. "She'll like them. That was kind of you to think of her."

Michelle sighed. "Well, did she tell you about the conversation we had in the parking lot of the mall the day after I saw you all at Tacky Taco?"

"No, she never mentioned that."

"She gave me a good talking to and made me realize something about myself." When she didn't immediately continue, Erin asked her what she realized. Looking at her, Michelle sheepishly smiled. "She made me realize that I needed to change because I've been a major pain in the ass. I don't think that there was ever a time when I wasn't. I took a long look at myself in the mirror--literally--and I hated what I saw. I don't want to be that person any longer. And I have your terrific wife to thank. She got through to me." Michelle chuckled. "I even obtained a job last Thursday. I'm working as a secretary for my father's company, but it's a start!"

"Good for you Michelle," Erin replied while smiling. "I'm proud of you and I'm sure that Court will be too."

"How is she?"

Though she found Michelle's newfound benevolence touching, Erin didn't care to talk about what had transpired earlier, less she start crying again. "She hasn't come out of surgery yet. Probably won't take much longer."

The other woman nodded. "I see. Well, I'll be back to visit if you don't mind, but I have to get back to work now--this is my lunch hour. Could I call you later to check on her? I really want to know how she feels after the surgery is complete. Though I'm confident that everything will be fine, I'd like to touch base. My grandmother had an aneurysm--two actually, a few years ago and her recovery went remarkably well. So if a 71 year old woman can do it, I know your partner can."

Studying her face, Erin wondered if her wife was a secret hypnotist. Surely, this couldn't be her ex-girlfriend sitting next to her being so...nice and...sweet. The words nice and sweet didn't describe Michelle Braddock. At least they didn't until the day she had her meaningful talk with Court. *You go sweetheart!*

"Thank you so much Michelle. Though I'm anxious for her surgery to be over, you've made me feel some better. And you may come by to visit anytime that you want and feel free to call me. Do you still have my cell phone number? I intend to spend the night here."

Assuring her that she did have it--the number was on speed dial--Michelle set her gifts on the coffee table and then gave Erin a hug and a chaste kiss on the cheek before leaving. Picking up the teddy bear, Erin traced the words on its sign.

Yes, please get well soon my love.

Erin stood outside of the double doors leading into the recovery room with Vicki at her side. The neurosurgeon recently finishing surgery late that afternoon had come to retrieve Erin from the waiting room. She and her team had been able to control Court's ruptured aneurysm and stopped her from hemorrhaging. Vicki informed Erin that there was a great chance that vasospasm would occur, which meant that the blood vessels in Court's head might tighten and narrow due to irritation from the leaked blood. This would be dangerous and in some cases it proved fatal. Although it could take a few days for vasospasm to occur, *if* it did occur, Vicki had already prescribed medication for her.

"And honey please don't be alarmed when you see her," Vicki started in a gentle voice. Her usually bright eyes were glassy as though she were about to cry at any moment. "Of course she has bandages around her head but we also had to put in a ventilator to help with her breathing. She is breathing on her own, but I wanted a controlled amount of oxygen traveling to her brain, so that's the reason for the big blue tube in her mouth."

"Okay." Erin nodded, closely watching her friend's face. "Are you alright?"

Producing an unconvincing wobbly smile, the redhead shook her head. "Yes. Tired I suppose."

"Vicki."

Looking straight into Erin's swollen and reddened eyes, she could no longer hold back the tears that had threatened to come since Court's aneurysm burst. She felt hands landing on her shoulders, but her vision was much too bleary for her to adequately see. "I'm sorry Erin," Vicki wailed. "I'm so sorry that I..." Those hands wrapped around her waist and pulled her into a warm body. "I couldn't stop it from rup...rupturing. And now..."

"Shh." Erin stroked her back as fresh tears coursed down her own face. "It's not your fault Vicki. You did all that you could. It was a huge aneurysm and we knew that surgery was risky, but if Court hadn't gone through with it, she might not be with us right now. And she's going to make it. Because of you and your team she will."

Planting a kiss on the taller woman's cheek, the neurosurgeon stepped back from her arms as she wiped at her cheeks with her hands. "I told Keisha and the rest of the group that she was in good hands."

Raising her hand, Erin removed a tear that her friend had missed. "And she was."

Vicki's resulting smile wasn't as weak as her last. "I'm sorry for crying. I'm supposed to be a professional and here you are comforting me."

"You recently comforted me." Erin smiled back. "I owed you one."

Offering to inform their friends that Court was now resting in recovery and that they should head home for the night, Vicki hugged the other woman before heading toward the waiting room. Turning toward the doors that would lead her to her wife, Erin took a deep breath and pushed through them.

Spotting her the moment she walked through the doors, a nurse with a pleasant expression walked over. "Hello. May I help you?"

"Yes. I'm here to see Courtney Calloway. She just had surgery for a ruptured aneurysm."

The nurse's expression turned apologetic. "I'm sorry, but only spouses and parents are allowed and that's in special cases."

"That's not a problem. Dr. Vicki Lange said that I could visit with her for a few minutes and she happens to be my wife. You can page Dr. Lange if this is still a problem."

"Oh!" The nurse appeared thoroughly embarrassed. "That won't be necessary and I apologize."

Erin smiled at her. "That's fine. It might not be often that you see same-sex married couples here."

She lightly chuckled as she bobbed her head. "True. What's your name?"

"Erin Tucker."

"Follow me and I'll take you to her, Erin."

There were a total of ten beds in the expansive recovery room and four of them were filled. Leading Erin to Court's bed, the nurse asked her if she wanted a chair. Her rapidly blurring eyes on the small form lying under a large blanket that made her appear even smaller, Erin shook her head.

"No thank you," she whispered through quivering lips. She wanted to pick Court up, hold her tightly in her arms and never let go. She felt a hand rubbing the middle of her back, but she was powerless to look away from her wife, the tears sliding along her cheeks. Producing a tissue from the travel size pack she always kept in her pocket for times such as this, the nurse tucked it into Erin's hand, informed her to take all the time she needed and then walked away to check on her other temporary patients.

Because the ET tube was in Court's mouth, Erin leaned over and softly kissed both of her cheeks, wiping away one tear that dropped onto the soft skin. "Hello Mrs. Tucker," she spoke in a tender voice. "What's the big deal with worrying us all like that? You even had Mom shedding a few tears and she's a strong one." Erin's mouth hinted at a smile. "Just for scaring the daylights out of us, when you fully recover you must take one--no make that two of my Boot Camp classes. And I don't wanna hear any griping. It's for your own good."

She caressed the blonde's cheek. "Please wake up soon sweetheart. I love you." After staying about ten minutes longer, Erin kissed her wife's cheek once more before turning and heading toward the exit. Catching the nurse's eye, she smiled and thanked her before leaving.

Finding the room in the Neuro ICU where Court would be moved to after leaving the recovery room in another hour or so, Erin walked inside to find her parents sitting next to the empty bed. "Hey you two. I thought everyone had gone home." She hugged them both.

"We wanted to see you again before we left," her father briefly explained. "How is Court? Is she awake?"

Erin shook her head. "No. She might sleep for a while." After a short pause she added, "I know you must be tired. Mom you did all that wedding planning and Dad you have to be at work early in the morning. You both need your rest."

"Are you trying to get rid of us?" Alice asked, though there was a smile on her face. She glanced toward her husband. "I think your daughter is trying to give us the old heave-ho Steven." His only reply was a soft chuckle.

Erin even had to smile. "No Mom, but really it's going to be a while before Court arrives here and I'm fine so you can go home and rest."

"And what will you do?" Her father inquired.

"I don't plan on leaving until Court awakens."

Her parents knew that she would probably have a difficult time leaving the hospital until Court was discharged. "Would you like me to stop by your apartment tomorrow and pick you up some toiletries and a change of clothes before I drive here?" Alice offered.

"That would be great. Thank you Mom." Giving her mother the keys to her apartment, she walked them out to their car, waited until they began to pull out of the parking space and then returned inside of the hospital.

Three days later, Vicki had tests done, which confirmed that Court had developed vasospasm. Switching to a stronger medication to treat it, Vicki and Erin hoped that it would work; otherwise Court might have to endure another surgery. Vasospasm along with the ruptured aneurysm were the reasons why she laid in a coma and no one could be certain when she would wake up. The ventilator still in place, it was assisting her in breathing because with the blood vessels in her brain constricted, it was harder for oxygen to reach the brain. Often this resulted in brain damage. They wouldn't truly know if Court had any brain damage until she was conscious.

Occupying a padded chair situated next to her wife's bed, Erin had barely left it during the last few days. The only times she left was to use the convenient bathroom in Court's room and to hurry down to the cafeteria for a quick bite. That was unless one of her friends or parents stopped by to deliver breakfast, lunch, dinner or a snack to her. In fact, Erin only went to the cafeteria a couple of times.

Erin glanced toward her watch. 2:37 p.m. Her eyes growing heavy, she dropped her pencil in the crossword puzzle book and slipped that into her backpack. She had a few more blocks to fill in and then the puzzle would be complete, but she was much too tired to figure out what letters fit into those blocks right now. Kissing Court's cheek, she leaned her head back in the chair and closed her eyes.

The brunette had almost succeeded in drifting off to sleep, when someone lightly tapped her on the shoulder. Opening her eyes, she looked up at Adriana. She was about to say something when the Puerto Rican beauty pointed toward the door.

"It's time for you to get out." Erin's eyebrows lifted. "That's right. I'm putting you out. You've been in this hospital since Monday and I think you should go home, take a shower or a bubble bath and then sleep in your comfortable bed. It's my shift now so I'll be right here until you return. And I don't want you returning until eight tonight, because then I realize that they will

kick me out since I'm not lucky enough to be Court's spouse." Adriana grinned, pointing toward the door a second time. "So see you later alligator."

"Adriana that's sweet, but--"

"No." She vigorously shook her head. "You're doing this. Go home. I have both your cell and landline number. I'll call you if Court so much as twitches an eyelid. It's just a few hours. You can do this. You want to feel your best when she wakes up, don't you?" Erin replied that she did. "So you need some R&R. Listen to me. I know what I'm talking about."

Erin anxiously glanced between her friend and her wife. "You'll call me."

"I'll call you," Adriana repeated.

"What about the bookstore?"

"One of the perks of being the boss is that I can come and go as I please." She smiled. "So I'm taking the rest of the day off. A trusted and longtime employee of mine will close up tonight."

"Then I have no excuses I guess."

"I guess you don't." Adriana pulled her from the chair and then gently pushed her toward the door. "Out, out, out."

Chuckling, Erin thanked her verbally and physically with a hug, took one last long look at Court and then walked out.

The next day Erin sat watching a daytime talk show when she heard a knock on the door. Noticing the brown socks and brown shorts with a matching shirt and baseball cap, both of which had the UPS seal on it, a smile tugged at her lips. "Hello brown lady. Do you have a delivery for me?"

Her dimples showing as she grinned, Lindsay further walked into the room holding a small paper bag. "Nah, this is my lunch but some women have said that I myself am the best delivery they could ever receive."

"Oh, is that so?"

The Southerner nodded. "That is so ma'am."

Erin arched a brow. "Ma'am? You're two years older than me!"

"What's your point?" The other woman laughed and Lindsay joined in as she walked toward the bed. Leaning on the rail, she brushed two fingers against Court's cheek. "Hey Court, when are ya gonna get yourself outta this bed? You're not foolin' me. I know you're playin' possum, so open

those pretty green eyes soon, okay?" Lindsay paused as though she was listening to Court's reply. After five or so seconds passed she nodded. "Okay, we have a deal. I'll let ya rest a lil' longer."

"Erin I wanna run somethin' passed ya," Lindsay began as she pulled the extra chair in the room over to her friend and took a seat. As she opened her paper bag she asked Erin if she minded her eating a tuna sandwich. From previous experience, she knew that some people didn't like the smell of it. Remarking that she didn't have a problem with it, the younger woman waited for her to elaborate. Removing the saran wrap from her neatly cut homemade tuna sandwich, Lindsay picked up half and took a hearty bite. "You want the other half?" She asked Erin.

"No thank you hon. Keisha bought my lunch not too long ago and I'm full. What did you want to run passed me?"

"About Sweat Factory. I took over a couple of your classes this week as well as taught my own, but," pulling a can of Red Bull from the bag, she opened it and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls, "Toni and I had to turn away a lot of business. So I was thinkin'...well let me show ya." Popping the remainder of the first half of her sandwich into her mouth, Lindsay stood up, removed a white envelope from her back pocket and handed it to Erin. When the other woman asked what it was, she simply retorted for her to just open it up and see. Sitting down, Lindsay watched as her friend lifted the envelopes flap and pulled a personal check from it. Surprised blue eyes widened while looking at Lindsay.

"What's this for Lin?"

"I wanna be your business partner. That's if you'll have me. I was thinkin' we could do 40/60, with you of course havin' 60% of the profits. If ya say yes I have a couple ladies each with a lot of experience who would love to become Sweat Factory employees. They're willin' to be paid \$45 per class. And with them and I workin' we could keep Sweat Factory runnin' along smoothly. Plus, with three people we can offer more classes and times for people to partake of those classes. This way you can concentrate on Court's recovery and when ya do come back, ya won't have to teach so many 'cause there are three other aerobics instructors."

"Are you quitting UPS?"

"No--at least not immediately. I am switchin' to part-time though." She sweetly smiled. "That's if ya give me a reason to."

Erin pocketed the check and then lifted her hand. "Consider yourself given a reason. This is an excellent idea and I would love to have you as my business partner Lin." Beaming, Lindsay pumped her hand. "Only thing is I want to alter those percentages. Court would tell you that I have a fetish for 50/50--that's what I want with you."

"Then 50/50 it is partna'." Lindsay winked under the bill of her cap. "Ya want me to bring you their resumes?"

"No, that won't be necessary. If you say their satisfactorily experienced then your word is good

enough for me. I can't wait to meet them."

Groaning, Lindsay put a dent in the remaining half of her sandwich. "That reminds me. On Sunday I'm gonna meet Nancy's parents for the first time. We're goin' out to dinner with 'em." She chuckled. "I'm scared shitless. I love--I like her a lot and I really wanna make a good impression."

"Love?" Erin grinned like the cat that just swallowed the canary. "Is Lindsay Stansfield, a.k.a Sexy Stud finally in love? Quick, someone call the San Francisco Chronicle!"

Lindsay chuckled through the sudden blush on her face. "Don't broadcast that information. I haven't told anybody."

"Not even Nancy?"

Eating the last bit of her sandwich, the Southerner shook her head in the negative. "I've known it for a while but I haven't told her yet. I was gonna tell her this weekend after I meet her parents. Even if I make an ass of myself durin' dinner."

Erin reached for her hand and squeezed. "You could never. They'll adore you."

Sighing, Lindsay finished her Red Bull and then tossed her trash in the paper bag. "Alrighty. Then I'll try not to worry about the dinner."

"Good."

Looking toward the clock on the wall, the UPS worker stood up. "Gimme my sugar Erin. I've gotta get back to work."

Standing, Erin embraced her and kissed her cheek. "Thank you for stopping by and for the delightful proposal. Be careful lifting those boxes."

"I always am ma'am."

"You're *so* funny Mrs. Robinson."

Lindsay grinned. "Dude, was that absolutely necessary?"

"I don't know about necessary, but I enjoyed saying it."

The good news was that the medication had worked, getting the vasospasm under control and that with further tests, friends and family of Court learned that the leaked blood around her brain had been completely absorbed. Unfortunately, nine days had passed since her procedure and she was still in a coma. With every day that went by, Erin grew more worried and couldn't help

shedding tears when no one was around. Though Court was listed as stable, she just wouldn't wake up and that terrified her.

Sitting as close to the bed as her chair would allow, Erin held the petite blonde's hand as she gazed at her as though she were thinking that if she watched long enough, Court would soon feel her stare and therefore open her eyes.

Her throat beginning to tighten as tears stung her eyes, the brunette brushed her lips across her wife's hand before releasing it from her grasp. Lowering her head, she lightly rested her cheek against Court's chest, feeling her steady heartbeat underneath. As she curved an arm around her stomach, tears slid down her face and onto the sheet. Her mouth opening as she wept, she pleaded for the other woman to wake up, to come back to her.

Erin had nearly cried herself to sleep when a hand touched the back of her head. Immediately alert, she raised her head and behind her not seeing anyone. Thinking that it must have only been her imagination, she turned back around, her eyes connecting with a pair of groggy but wide open green ones.

In a hurry to get out of the chair, Erin almost fell on the floor. "Court?! Court, do you hear me?"

The blonde tried to speak, but quickly found that she couldn't due to the breathing tube in her mouth. She settled for a brief nod. That small action seemed to wear her out because her eyes began to droop.

Erin took her hand again. "I love you honey." Though her eyes were now closed, Court squeezed her hand in reply. Erin couldn't have been happier if she arose from the bed and started to sing and dance.

Later that afternoon after she was given a thorough exam, which she briefly opened her eyes for, the ventilator was removed from her mouth. Court didn't awaken again until the next morning fifteen minutes after Alice left.

A soft moan reaching her ears, Erin dropped her crossword puzzle book, gently smiling as she looked at Court. "Good morning love. Are you okay?"

The blonde tried to speak but her voice sounded extremely hoarse. Vicki had informed Erin that she might not be able to speak for a few days because of the ET tube. Court brought her hand to her neck while she mouthed something. Each time Erin guessed wrong, she shook her head from side to side on her pillow. The brunette guessed correctly on her fourth try. A lip reader she wasn't. Court had mouthed to her that her throat was hurting, which was another side effect of having an oral ventilator.

"Would you like some water?"

Court shook her head no.

"A throat lozenge?"

Another shake of the head.

"What can I get you then sweetheart?" When the older woman pointed at her she laughed. It felt good to truly laugh again. "You want me?" Her wife nodded. "I see. And what do you want me for?" As Court crooked a finger at her, Erin stood and leaned over so that their noses were nearly touching. "Yes?" She drew out the short word.

Cupping the sides of her face, Court raised her head an inch from the pillow to kiss her lips. Nine days had been way too long to go without contact. Smiling against her lips, Erin pressed her against them once more before lifting her head.

"Well, you can have me anytime that you get ready." Her eyes became watery, but this time because of joy. "It's good to have you back. I love you so much Court."

Her wife mouthed her response and Erin was able to decipher it on her first try.

I love you too.

Pulling up to the large building Court jumped out of the car and ran around to the passenger side to help her wife out of the RAV4. Erin needed all the help she could get since she was blindfolded. Though she knew that it was probably futile to do so, she asked where they were going--again. Of course, the other woman jokingly replied that it was none of her business. At least not yet.

After walking about ten feet, they came to a stop. She could hear traffic, so Erin assumed that they were standing on a sidewalk. Her ears perked up when she listened to keys jingling. Ah, so they were going inside of a locked building.

Erin just had to smirk at herself. *What a fabulous deduction Sherlock Holmes!*

Within seconds, a hand pressed against the small of her back as Court led her inside of the building. Though the blonde switched on a light, Erin had no way of knowing that because her blindfold was successfully keeping her in the dark. It was morning time, but it seemed like midnight to her.

Nimble fingers tugged at the knot on her blindfold as Court stated, "Alright, you can look now baby."

The blindfold removed, Erin blinked several times for her eyes to adjust to the bright lights above. Her eyes then swept around the large rectangular space in curiosity. She wondered why

her wife had taken her to a Laundromat. And not just any Laundromat, but a broken down one that couldn't possibly be open to the public for use. Surely, no one would dare want to bring his or her clothes here to clean. The place was too dirty to clean in.

What few washers and dryers there looked as though they weren't stable enough to wash and dry a handkerchief, let alone an entire load of clothes. The folding tables were chipped with one of them was missing a couple of legs and the two ceiling fans hanging above seemed like they could fall at any given moment. The television placed behind a broken glass partition was also broken. Dirt and garbage littered the floor and just about everything else was covered with a thick layer of dust.

Erin looked at Court, perplexed by the grand smile she wore. "Sweetheart um...why are we here?"

"I know it looks a little bad..." Her partner arched both eyebrows as high as she could manage. Court chuckled. "Okay, it looks absolutely terrible but I tend to make it absolutely incredible."

"You do?"

"Yep." She took a deep breath. "I just bought it."

Erin gave her an 'are you out of your mind' look. "What?! Since when did you want a Laundromat?"

"While I was recovering it occurred to me that I wanted something to do. I know I told you that I had retired, but these past few months I've started to get the itch--the itch to work. I fear that my memory isn't sharp enough to be a lawyer anymore--plus that isn't what I want to do anyway--so I tried to think of something that might not be too stressful and soon I came up with this idea. It's the perfect job. It isn't necessary for me to be here all the time because most people are capable of washing their own clothes." Court started to walk around with her arms outstretched. "I plan to make this one of the best Laundromats in San Francisco. Washing clothes can be a chore, but I want people to want to come here."

She looked so passionate and excited by the idea of having her own business, Erin couldn't help but to be excited for her. The first two months of her recovery had been arduous for Court--she often felt frustration and confusion. Thankfully, she didn't suffer with any physical disabilities, but they soon learned upon her coming out of her coma that she had difficulties with her memory. Four months after her procedure, Court didn't remember collapsing in Vicki and Keisha's bathroom and awakening in her car where she admitted to Erin that she had an aneurysm. And though her memory of she and Erin's wedding day was a little fuzzy, she had near perfect recollection of their wedding night. Their wedding video had come in handy. Erin lost count how many times she watched it.

Court's short-term memory and her ability to think properly had been affected, but with the help of a speech therapist she had greatly improved. Occasionally she might still forget, such as when she has been in the middle of a sentence and then stops speaking because she forgot what it was

she wanted to say. However, she, Erin and others close to them were elated with the progress she had made.

Walking up to her wife, Erin slipped her arms around her while kissing her soft lips. "I'm all for it sweetheart. If anyone could pull this off, that person would be you."

Court's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Totally. Why don't you share your ideas with me?"

The blonde began to resume her walk around the dilapidated Laundromat as she spoke. "I'm thinking all black washers and dryers. I've seen the black ones and they are sleek, sexy and oh so twenty-first century." She grinned. "I know they're just washers and dryers but sexy really does apply. You must see these beauties."

Erin grinned back. "I'm picking up what you're putting down. Go on."

Court indicated the back wall. "And we'll have a coffee/snack bar over there. So while you wait for your clothes to finish you could sip a cappuccino and munch on biscotti, a croissant or a muffin. I'll hire someone to oversee that. In fact I talked with Nancy the other day and she might be interested."

"Okay. I'm starting to picture it..."

"And over here," Court hurried across to the other side of the room, "we'll have one of those plasma televisions and..."

Continuing to listen, Erin occupied a bench after assuring herself that it wouldn't break. A deliriously happy look on her face, she watched her wife moving around the Laundromat, chatting a million miles an hour and gesturing with her hands.

Her wife. Erin broadly grinned.

I like the sound of that.

THE END