

~ One Good Memory ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. I only wish I knew these women and the town of Edgewater. In fact, if you know them, e-mail me at once.

Content warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. This will still be here when you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...lock the door and have at it.

Caution: You can e-mail me if you feel so inclined, but don't expect a reply. Hell, I don't even reply to my family's e-mails. I'm a cranky, rude, insensitive bore and even when I think I should write back, I don't. It's just the way I am. Don't take it personally.

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Part One

The further from camp Robin got, the more she relaxed. The river was seldom more than thigh deep and she waded along, emptying her mind of her family's expectations and loving exhortations. Sometimes she wished she had a family that lived in denial of her sexuality. She knew her life would be worse if they did, but it grew tiresome at times. They all wanted her to find a new lover and they all had their own ideas about how and where she should start looking. All of her siblings were still in their first marriages and had at least one child. Robin thought they were slightly offended that she had dared to leave Tammy and ruin the family's perfect record. Except for her mother, and possibly her brother Bruce, none of them really understood how intolerable the relationship had become.

Robin didn't know what had changed for Tammy after 11 years together, but it seemed that she had woken up cranky and vituperative one day and had never gotten over it. Robin had not been able to do anything right or make her smile or earn a kind word regardless of her efforts for over a year. While she couldn't figure out what she had done to deserve it, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that it had somehow been her fault.

The final straw had been on their twelfth anniversary. Robin was at the edge of her ability to cope, but they had been together for a long time and she wanted to make one last effort to get through to her. She had purchased a lovely diamond pendant for Tammy and taken the afternoon off work to create a special candlelight dinner. She hoped that her effort would be seen and appreciated, but she ended up eating alone.

Tammy had come home near midnight, drunk. By then, Robin had gone through the entire house and packed up everything that she really cared about and needed. It was all in her car waiting for

her and she was resigned to leaving everything else—all of the furniture and books and knick-knacks—behind. She had removed everything that was irreplaceable to her and was sitting at the table with the congealed remnants of their anniversary dinner when Tammy staggered in and asked: "What the hell are you doing?"

"Celebrating our twelfth anniversary."

"Why?"

It was over for Robin in that single moment. "That's exactly what I've been asking myself for the last 4 hours," she said tiredly. She stood, picked up a small key ring and held it out to Tammy. "These are the keys to your car and this apartment. I would like my car keys back now."

"What?" Tammy looked utterly confused.

"Please give me the keys to my car." She took Tammy's keys from her hand, quickly removed what she wanted and handed the rest back.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving, Tammy." She watched the familiar features of a total stranger taking it all in. "You don't love me and I can't bear to be around you anymore. I don't know what I did—if I did anything at all—but it's over between us. All the bills are paid. I've got everything I want. You can have everything else."

Tammy looked drunk, but she seemed to be unaffected. "Okay, then. Bye," she added as an afterthought.

Robin had left quietly and checked into a motel for the night. Tammy's apathy had broken something inside of her and she had cried until she was sick. She had the resources to find another apartment right away, but her mother had begged her to come home and she had ended up in her childhood bedroom. It had been four months and she was still in the process of healing.

If not for her job as the assistant manager for the local franchise of a chain supermarket, she likely would have become a total hermit. Her family and friends had been after her to start living again, but she was tormented by the fact that she didn't know what had happened between Tammy and herself. She worried that if she didn't understand, she would be doomed to repeat the past.

The annual family camping trip had come around and Robin had looked forward to it in hopes that it would allow her an opportunity to reconnect with herself. Today was the first chance she'd had to get away from her family and begin to search for inner balance and harmony. With each step she let go of the cliché advice her family had been heaping on her: *There are plenty of fish in the sea... Love will be waiting when you least expect it... There's a woman out there right now looking for you... You've got to get back on the horse... It's not good for you to be alone.* The list went on and on. She knew they just wanted her to be happy, but there were so many of them and

only one of her and it had become relentless.

Robin had thrown leftovers from 2 days of camping in her daypack along with water, beer, a towel, sunscreen and binoculars and started walking. Before coming on the camping trip she had studied a map of the area so she knew that theirs was the last campground on the river and the rest of the still undeveloped area was owned by the state's Power Company. The chance that she would run into another human being was extremely remote. With that in mind, she had indulged in the warmth of the day at the first opportunity and stripped down to just her sneakers. She knew that it was still a risk, but if she ran into someone with nefarious intentions, shorts and a T-shirt weren't likely to protect her and perhaps her vulnerability would make her more likely to run before it was too late.

It was impossible at first to avoid feeling as if she were being watched, but over time it faded and she was able to enjoy the sensuality of wind, water and sun on bare skin. With no destination in mind and no time frame, Robin meandered and allowed herself to be distracted by every little thing. She investigated wildflowers and took the time to creep up on a lizard until she was able to touch its tail before it darted away. With her binoculars she was able to watch a red-tailed hawk cruising for a meal and tiny songbirds flitting busily through the trees. She watched two blue jays for almost 10 minutes as they sat back on their tail feathers and fought with their feet. One of them finally captured the other by its beak and calmly held it off. Robin laughed so hard it scared them away.

The boundaries of flesh seemed to expand and she became hyper aware of the life and beauty that surrounded her. *This* was what she had been hoping for. *This* was what she needed.

She was standing in the middle of the small river watching a jackrabbit nervously eating roots when something bumped into her knee. She looked down in surprise and made a grab for the tennis shoe that was floating past. She stood staring at it, not quite understanding what it was doing here, and saw something with blue and white stripes floating off to her left. Without thinking about it, she chased it down.

She held someone's shorts in her hand. Together with the shoe, she realized that someone was upriver from her. Robin crouched to make herself small and looked around nervously. Unless someone was in the trees, she appeared to be alone. The shoe was a woman's shoe, size 8, and the shorts were feminine in cut. A flash of white in the water drew her and she held up a dripping sock.

Robin reasoned that there was a woman upstream who had somehow lost her clothes in the current. Whether or not she was alone she didn't know. She debated with herself for several minutes, then decided to continue her trek slowly and cautiously. She kept her eyes open for more clothing and for the owner, but didn't see anything for almost 15 minutes.

A sports bra had snagged on a branch and was lazily surfing the current until Robin untangled it. It occurred to her that none of the articles she had found so far belonged to a man and that there was a woman ahead of her who was probably as naked as she was. Robin relaxed a bit and couldn't help grinning as she walked. She listened for voices and studied the surrounding terrain

carefully, but she expected to find a single person. She located the other sock and a pair of simple cotton underwear before stepping around a rock face and spotted a woman sunning herself on a large flat rock in mid-stream.

Robin ducked back and began searching the landscape for other people. With her binoculars she was able to determine that the woman was currently alone. She turned the glasses on the woman and studied her. It had been a long time since Robin had seen a naked woman. While it didn't make her feel particularly sexual she couldn't stop looking and an awareness began to surface in her own body.

The woman was blond and slender, but generous in breast and hip. Combined with the fineness of her features, Robin thought she pretty much defined the word *voluptuous*. It made her feel clumsy and gaunt in comparison. About the best she could say of her body was that she was fit and strong. She tried to imagine how the blond would feel against her and suddenly realized what she was doing.

I'm such a pervert! Spying on a woman with binoculars and thinking about sex! She angrily shoved the glasses into her pack and rolled the clothes into the shorts to keep them together. *She doesn't look aware that she's lost these and there's no telling how far she is from her camp. She could be in real trouble without them. She's only got one shoe left and that won't get her far.*

Putting herself in the blonde's shoes, figuratively, she decided not to get dressed before approaching. She hoped that seeing a naked woman would lessen the surprise that she was no longer alone. Robin walked out to the middle of the river and began to walk towards her.

She began to call out almost immediately, but there was no response. She called again from about 10 yards away. "Hello!"

The woman sat up in panic and tried to cover herself. Her last shoe fell into the current and Robin moved to intercept it. Just as she lunged and felt her hand close on it, her foot slipped and the river tumbled her over and over. Getting her feet under her again, Robin stood up with a laugh and flung her shoulder-length hair back. She still had all of the clothes and the shoe that had precipitated her submersion in her hands and she held them up triumphantly. The blond glanced around her and seemed to realize that she had lost everything. She visibly relaxed as Robin made her way back to the rock, though she did search the landscape for more people.

"Don't worry, I'm alone," Robin laughed. "I was wading downstream a ways and started running into clothes. I thought whoever lost them might need them back." She set the bundled clothes on the rock. "I believe these are yours?"

The woman brushed her long hair back over her shoulder and began to unfold herself. "I didn't realize I had lost them. Thank you."

Her voice was smooth as glass, but rich as honey and Robin felt her heart beat a little faster. She was quite lovely up close and her eyes were a charming shade of blue. Her knees began to knock underwater. "You're welcome."

"So, tell me," the blond said with amusement. "Is there someone downstream gathering up your clothing as well?"

Robin felt a blush coming on and she tried to cover it with a laugh. "No. It's all in my backpack."

"They're probably wet now, too."

Robin slipped her arm out of a strap and swung the soggy pack around to set it on the rock. She unzipped it and laughed. "Looks like we're in the same boat."

The blond gathered up her things and slid into the water. "Come on," she said over her shoulder. "We can lay everything out to dry in the sun."

Robin followed her, guiltily enjoying the view from behind and set her pack on the sand. She hung her clothing out on nearby branches and returned to assess any water damage to the other contents of her pack. "Thank God for Tupperware and Ziploc."

The blond knelt next to her curiously. "What else have you got in there?"

"Lunch, beer, water, binoculars and sunscreen. Don't you have anything? Or did I just not find it downstream?"

"I'm only about 30 minutes from camp, though I expect it would have seemed longer if I'd had to make my way back naked and shoeless. Thanks for rescuing me."

"No problem," Robin shrugged casually. "Would you like a beer?"

The woman accepted a can. "I usually make a point of not drinking with strangers."

She held out her hand. "Robin."

"Maryl."

Robin tried not to think about the warmth of the hand she held. "Merrill?"

Maryl spelled her name and let go of her hand. "My mother wanted me to be named Mariel, but the nurse didn't know how to spell it. Hence, Mary-l."

Robin grinned as she popped the tab on her own beer. "Your name is a typo?"

Maryl tucked her hair behind one ear. "Sometimes it's the simple things that throw you for a loop."

Robin was enchanted and she used dumping the water out of her pack and putting the food back in it to give herself a slight breather. She pushed it into a shady spot and sat down in the sand.

"So, what brings you out on the river today?" She admired Maryl's legs as she stretched them out on the sand and relaxed back on her hands. Robin's peripheral vision was focused on the blonde thatch where the slender legs came together and she felt ashamed for noticing.

"I'm on a week long getaway. There are seven of us-all women."

"Are you co-workers?"

"No." Maryl glanced at her and took a long drink of beer. "It's kind of a...support group. I'm the newest member and I don't seem to be fitting in very well. After three days of talking non-stop about grief and loss, I just needed to get away for a while."

"Grief and loss?" Robin shook her head with a rueful grin. "Sounds like my life of late." She had noticed that Maryl was watching her surreptitiously and decided abruptly to cut to the chase. "Do they accept lesbians?" She held her breath as she waited for a reaction.

Maryl's eyebrow arched dramatically. "We *are* lesbians. What are the odds, eh?"

Robin smiled in relief. "That 2 naked lesbians with broken hearts would meet on a river in the middle of nowhere? Astronomical, I guess, though I think I remember hearing a joke that started like this once."

"Let's make a pact." Maryl's eyes were twinkling. "Let's not talk about ex's or broken hearts or sad things. Let's just leave all that far away and enjoy this lovely day."

"Well, gee," Robin chuckled. "Whatever will we talk about?"

"We don't have to talk about anything. We can just sit here and get drunk."

"I only brought three," Robin said with regret.

"Then we'll *pretend* to be drunk. Work with me, Robin. Work with me."

Robin laughed at her dramatic gestures. "Okay. Do you do this sort of thing often?"

"Drink beer? Now and then."

"No. Drape yourself on a rock and kick your clothes in the river to see who comes calling."

Maryl pushed at Robin's shoulder. "It seemed like it was isolated enough that I could try it. I've never been camping before and skinny dipping seemed like part of the whole experience."

Robin grinned. "It's only skinny-dippin' if you do it at night."

"What's it called in the daytime?"

"Indecent exposure."

"Ha!" Maryl acted as if she were just getting a really bad joke. "Ha! You're killing me!" She laughed and flipped her hair back in a totally unconscious gesture. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm the assistant manager of a supermarket."

"Sounds exciting."

Robin scrunched her face up. "Ranks right up there with making gravel by hand."

"You don't like it?"

"No, I *do* like it; it's interesting and challenging. But I wouldn't exactly call it exciting." She pulled one knee up and wrapped her arm around it. "What about you?"

"I'm a bookkeeper slash receptionist in a medical office." She shrugged. "I guess it ranks pretty close to what you do in terms of excitement, but it keeps me busy and it pays the bills."

Robin wanted to know everything about this woman and she searched for something to talk about just so she could hear her voice. "What did you want to be when you grew up? When you were a kid, I mean."

"Truth?" Maryl sighed and stared off across the water. "I wanted to be a dancer when I was small, but then I decided I wanted to be a photographer for National Geographic. I used to have an old Instamatic camera-it was broken-and I wandered around taking pictures all the time. It drove my family nuts having me clicking and winding away at them so I started taking pictures of scenery. I pretended I was on adventure in Africa and Thailand and Antarctica. Anywhere, really. Our dog, Freckles, was alternately a lion or a polar bear-whatever I happened to need at the time. My family thought I was terribly neurotic." Maryl smiled. "Turns out they may have been right. At least from their point of view." She laughed at herself. "What did you dream about?"

Robin rested her chin on her knee. "A little bit of everything I suppose. I didn't have a single dream like you. I wanted to be an astronaut and a cowboy and a scientist depending on what day it was. I thought about being a tennis player for awhile. I remember watching Billie Jean King when I was little and she impressed me. But my athletic skills are pretty pathetic so I went into management."

"Well, if you can't be what you want, be in charge. Sounds like a good motto. Maybe you should put it on a T-shirt and market it."

Robin finished her beer with a smile and tossed the empty can in the neighborhood of her pack. Beer always went straight to her bladder and now was no exception. With no other convenient options, she stood up and waded into the water. Facing upstream, she crouched down and used

her hands to wash sand off her butt. Resting her elbows on her knees, she saw Maryl watching her curiously. "Don't watch."

"Watch what?"

"I can't do it if you're watching. I hardly know you."

Maryl's eyes opened wide. "You're doing it in the river?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

Maryl looked around quickly. "I guess not." She stood up and began making her way carefully into the water.

"What are you doing?"

"I have to go, too."

Robin pointed at her feet. "You should put your shoes on. It saves your feet."

Maryl got back out to get her shoes and waded back in. By the time she crouched a few feet away, Robin was done and she watched Maryl's eyes close in relief. "You haven't been camping before, have you?"

"Nope," Maryl said easily. "And I've got to tell you, the whole sleeping on the ground thing is completely overrated. I wake up feeling like I've been beaten with sticks. And I hate the sleeping bags. You can't even move in them. It's like being tied up in a blanket."

"You've got one of those survival type mummy bags, don't you?"

"The clerk said it was good to 20 below zero."

"But it only gets down to about 50 here."

Maryl glared. "You're a big help, Robin."

She couldn't help but laugh. "Come here. I'll show you something nice." She led Maryl to the rock she had been sunning on and braced herself on the upstream side. Putting her feet on the rock, she stood up into the current and let it sluice over her. "Can you see what I'm doing?"

"Yeah."

"Come on. It feels good."

It took Maryl several tries before she found her balance and stabilized in the current. Robin heard her sigh over the noise of the river and smiled. Maryl's hand touched hers and quickly latched on.

Robin was more than content and they lay in the water's embrace for sometime in silence.

"It's like being in a waterfall," Maryl finally said loudly. "Not that I've ever been in one, but it's how I imagine it would be."

"I like how the water feels like separate threads. More like solid rain than anything else."

"How do you get out of it without being dashed against the rock?"

"Bend your knees and get your hands on it." Maryl's hand let go of hers and in moments she was pulling herself up to sit on the rock. Robin decided to show off a bit. She tipped her chin up and arched her back. Water gushed over her face and pushed her under. She reversed the motion smoothly and was pushed back to the surface. Finding the rhythm of the river she began to 'porpoise'. Her eldest brother had patiently taught her how to do this when she was young and it had been one of her favorite water sports once she got the hang of it. Breathing out slowly and grabbing fresh air every third or fourth time she surfaced, she continued to surf the current until she began to lose track of her surroundings. She crouched abruptly and let the water lift her up on the rock.

"That was amazing," Maryl said with awe. "You looked like a dolphin. It was beautiful."

Robin wiped her hair out of her eyes. "It's fun. You start to forget you're human if you do it long enough."

Maryl pulled her feet up on the rock and hugged her knees. "I'm glad you came along. It was nice before, too, but I feel safer and more relaxed with company."

Robin didn't know how to answer that without looking like a klutz. "Tell me about the people you're camping with."

"Well, it's not a therapy group. It's just some people who get together and have coffee. I've only been to four meetings. Eva is the leader, but she's not a therapist or anything. I get the impression she likes feeling like one, but she seems very responsible about not messing with people's heads. She's strong and confident and I kind of like her, but she's not very forthcoming about herself."

Robin turned around and stretched out on the rock. Caring more about the warmth than a tan, she turned on her belly and rested her face on her hands. Maryl followed suit as she continued to talk.

"Linda is..." Maryl snorted. "To be perfectly honest, I don't like her. I can't tell if she's incredibly bitter or just plain mean. She's bossy and controlling and she constantly challenges everyone. Whenever she really starts to pick on someone Eva steps in and puts a stop to it, but it's an ongoing battle and she just irritates me. Kirsten, on the other hand, is on the make."

Robin chuckled. Their elbows were touching and their eyes were locked. She felt completely drawn to this woman and the sound of her voice gave her goose bumps. She knew this sort of

thing was possible, but it was so unlikely that she wasn't sure how to handle it.

"She has this way of moving," Maryl explained. "Like she's a cat rubbing up against your leg. It might be flattering if it weren't so relentless and indiscriminate."

"Has she put the move on you, too?"

"See, it's not really like that. It's not personal and she never does anything inappropriate, it's just like...an open invitation. I'm starting to think it's all an act though. If you actually responded to it, I think she'd back off. I think she uses it as a mask, but I don't know what she's protecting. Aside from that, she really quite nice."

Robin counted in her head. "That's three. What about the others?"

"Brooke is the youngest-I think she's 26-and she's very defensive. You have to be on constant guard with what you say because somehow everything is a judgement on her. She's totally self-absorbed and doesn't realize it. It's not that she's out of control, but she pops up at the strangest times and turns your words into a value judgement of her life. And she cries *all the time*. Sometimes I just want to shake her.

"Wendy is unbearably sweet, but she has Doormat printed on her forehead. She never has an opinion or an unkind word. I think she's been hurt pretty badly, but I suspect it started when she was young as opposed to a recent trauma. I think she needs to get into a real therapy group. Either that or she needs to take martial arts. Maybe that would boost her confidence. But she has a heart of gold and you just want to hug her and make everything all better for her. If she got the right kind of help I think she'd make someone a wonderful partner."

Maryl turned on her side and propped her head up on her hand. "I like Noreen. We don't have anything in common, but she's smart and witty. She tends to be very quiet and withdrawn, but it's not a helpless attitude. She chooses to be that way. I think if you want to be friends with her, *you* have to do all the work in establishing intimacy. I think she has all these walls you've got to climb over to get to her, but I suspect that if you're willing to do the work, she's probably the type of woman who would make an excellent partner."

"Are you interested in her?"

Maryl grinned. "No."

"Why not?"

"Zero chemistry. I'm not sure she even has pheromones."

Robin wanted to ask if *she* had the pheromones Maryl was looking for, but she'd only met her an hour ago and she was afraid to be the only one feeling it.

"So," Maryl asked, "who are you camping with?"

"My family. This is our annual camping trip. We go someplace new every year."

"Tell me about them."

Robin smiled. "I'm the only girl and I'm number four out of five, but I'm twinned with number three."

Maryl blinked. "You're a twin?"

"Fraternal, of course. We look like siblings, not like duplicates. I'm closer to him emotionally than the others, but we weren't dressed alike as children or anything. He swears he always knows when I'm depressed or happy, but then, he's always been a little dramatic."

"What's his name?"

"Bruce." Robin watched Maryl figuring it out. "I know. Bruce Wayne. Batman. Batman and Robin."

"Your parents must have a good sense of humor."

"We were named after our grandparents. They swore it wasn't deliberate."

"What about your other brothers?"

"Eric, Julian and Trevor-in that order."

"Who else is at your camp?"

"My mom, my Uncle Gus-he's not really my uncle-he was my father's best friend and we sort of adopted him. All of my brothers are married so their wives are here. And then, Eric has two kids, Julian has three and Bruce and Trevor each have one."

Maryl's face was uncertain. "And your dad?"

"He died of cancer a few years ago. He went real quick so we didn't have to watch him suffer. He was a great guy."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Robin didn't feel particularly grief stricken anymore. She had her moments, but this wasn't one of them. "What about your family?"

"All alive and well and living in North Carolina. I've got 2 older sisters and 3 nieces. My family doesn't seem prone to boys except through marriage."

"I've always wondered what it would be like to have a sister," Robin mused. "Someone to talk to and share things with."

Maryl laughed. "In my experience, there are *moments* like that, but it seems to be mostly bickering and fighting and competing. That's one of the main reasons I moved so far away. It can be fun in small doses and with a few stiff drinks, but as a way of life? Forget it."

"That's too bad. My family isn't like that at all."

"It's all in the parents," Maryl said cryptically. "I thought we weren't supposed to talk about anything depressing."

Robin smiled. "Okay. Where do you live now?"

"Edgewater. It's about two hours from here."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," Maryl said happily. "It's clean and pretty and the people are simple without being stupid or ignorant."

"I live in Breining. The other direction."

"Do you like it?"

Robin shrugged. "I grew up there. It's familiar."

Maryl shook her head and tsked disapprovingly. "You don't love your job and you don't love your hometown. That's two strikes, Robin."

"What are you saying?" Robin felt herself beginning to bristle. "One more thing and I'll have to move? Are you always this bossy?"

"I'm not bossy," Maryl said lightly. "As the youngest child it's my job to be precocious and spoiled. I get to say whatever I want and you have to think it's cute."

"I see," Robin said with mock severity. "By any chance, does your daddy call you 'Princess'?"

Maryl frowned. "He calls me 'The Brat'."

"I defer to his judgement," Robin teased. There was nothing to grab onto as Maryl shoved her into the river. Robin let herself float to the surface and laughed as the current slowly carried her down river. She was forced to sit up when her ass began bumping along the river bottom and she dug her feet in to keep from going any further downstream. She couldn't quit grinning and she idly picked up rocks and skipped them along the surface while she tried to get her attraction under control.

I really like her. I feel comfortable and safe with her. I like how she looks and talks and smiles and I like that she makes fun of herself. It's odd that I should accidentally run into her here. It makes me wonder if there really is such a thing as fate. It's too bad she lives so far away. Driving over 200 miles to take someone on a date seems a little extreme. Would I ask her out if she lived in Breining? Yeah, I would. But I'll probably never see her again and there's no guarantee that she'd even want to see me. Does she even like me?

Robin turned to look back at the rock. *She's watching me. I think she does like me. She did say she was glad I showed up. I wonder if she has more than kind feelings. What would I do if she did?*

Robin got to her feet and strolled back towards Maryl. She still had her grin and she couldn't make it go away. Maryl was grinning, too, and Robin stopped about 10 feet away to stare at her. They couldn't keep it up for long and they were soon laughing at one another.

"I'm sorry," they said together.

"My dad's right," Maryl said. "I am a brat. I shouldn't have said..."

"No," Robin interrupted. "It's just that I've got so many people telling me what I should do with my life right now. They all mean well, but after a while I start hearing it in every conversation."

Maryl cocked her head hopefully. "Friends?"

Robin nodded. "I'm hungry. I've got tons of food. Do you want to share?"

"I'd love to. Will you teach me how to skip rocks?"

"Food first," Robin agreed. She spread out her damp towel on the sand and they sat cross-legged, knee to knee as she pulled food from her pack. She hadn't paid much attention when she loaded her pack so it was a little like opening a grab bag. She found fruit salad, fried chicken, corn on the cob, a single desiccated hot dog and pork and beans. "I'm not sure that will taste good cold," Robin said of the last item.

"Hot-cold-I'm past caring. How come you brought so much?"

"I just grabbed the containers that were obviously leftovers. I didn't feel like repacking everything smaller. There's only one spoon though."

"Have you got anything I should worry about?"

The hots for you. "No. I'm clean."

"Me, too."

Maryl wasn't shy about digging in and Robin was hard pressed to keep up. Whoever had the spoon was as likely to feed herself as the other and Robin couldn't decide whether she enjoyed being fed or feeding Maryl more.

"Why does this taste so good?" Maryl asked with real pleasure.

"It's a camping thing," Robin suggested. "It's like the coffee in the morning."

"You're right," Maryl said with sudden realization. "It smells 10 times as good here as it does at home."

"Even people who don't drink coffee at home just have to have a cup when they're camping."

"I had a baked potato last night that almost made me cry it was so good."

Robin held up the cob she was working on. "This corn was better last night, too. It was baked in the coals of the fire with the husks still on and it was sweet beyond belief."

"It's still good," Maryl insisted.

"I like how you eat," Robin surprised herself by saying.

Maryl stopped, uncertain. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're not afraid of your food."

Maryl grinned. "I know what you mean. But I have to admit, I'm eating twice as much camping as I eat at home." Maryl nodded at the fruit salad. "Will you give me a bite of that?"

Robin offered a spoonful and held her breath as Maryl closed her lips over the spoon and pulled back. The tip of Maryl's tongue darted out for a brief moment and then disappeared. Robin dropped her eyes and brought a bite to her own mouth. She could feel Maryl's lips on the spoon as she pulled it out slowly. Maryl was watching her and she looked away as if caught doing something naughty. "Do you want to split this last beer?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

Robin let Maryl do the honors and take the first drink. Together, they demolished all of the food—even the pitiful little hot dog. Maryl insisted on washing up and Robin watched her at the water's edge cleaning her mother's Tupperware. She could tell that Maryl was starting to pink up in the sun, so she moved the towel to a shady spot and got out her sunscreen. "You should use this," she said when Maryl came back. "It would be a shame if you burned this early in your trip."

Maryl nodded and turned to kneel in front of her. "Will you do my back?"

It honestly had not occurred to Robin that she might be asked to perform this service and she felt

her hands shaking as Maryl lifted her hair out of the way. Using both hands, she patiently worked the lotion into the flawless skin. She tried to balance business-like with considerate and was disappointed when it was over.

"You have a nice touch," Maryl said softly. "Turn around and I'll do you."

Robin turned and leaned forward. She could hear Maryl rubbing lotion into her hands and tried to relax. Her touch, when it came, was slow and sensual and Robin's bones turned to honey.

"You have a scar on your shoulder," Maryl said as her finger traced it. "How did you get it?"

"Parachuting accident."

"I've always wanted to try that. What's it like?"

"I couldn't say." Robin concentrated on her breathing. It had been so long since she had been touched that her brain didn't seem capable of handling the sensation. "I was four years old. Eric and Julian built a parachute out of my mother's best sheets and 2 x 4's and tied me to it. They threw me off the roof. It didn't work."

Maryl was laughing helplessly and Robin smiled as Maryl's forehead pressed into the back of her neck.

"We lived in a two story house," she continued. "I'm lucky I didn't get killed."

Maryl lifted her head and her hands moved over Robin's shoulders and down her arms before moving back up to spread like wings over her shoulder blades. "Why did you let them do that?" Maryl continued to laugh.

"I was four!" Robin defended herself. "They said it would be like flying and I believed them. I was the smallest except for Trevor and he was only a toddler. Bruce had chicken pox so it had to be me. I broke my collarbone, my arm in two places and there's another scar on my head." She reached up to touch it and felt Maryl's hands move to her hair. She almost groaned when she felt lush breasts press into her back.

"Yikes!" Maryl said with reverence. "You *could* have died. I thought you were kidding."

"I think Eric and Julian got the worst of it. Both of my parents had a go at them and they couldn't sit down for a week. I swear, it took 10 years off my mother's life."

"I can't even remember being four," Maryl said as her hands continued their job. "I barely remember first grade, so I must have been about six."

"I remember Trevor coming home from the hospital right after I turned three. Bruce doesn't, but I do."

Maryl worked silently and Robin savored every moment of it. When she was finished, they sat side by side and covered themselves with the protective cream.

"I should have brought a razor," Maryl said regretfully. "My legs are all prickly. I brought all the stuff on the list, but I didn't think to bring stuff I use all the time."

"What else do you miss?"

"Number one has to be my bed," Maryl spoke firmly. "And number two is razors. I should have brought books and I miss my body scrubber. No matter how much time I spend in the water, I still feel grungy."

Robin laughed. "But it's good for the soul to be grungy once in a while."

"Who told you that? If you can't find enlightenment when you're clean, I don't want any. Pleasure is as good for the soul as suffering. Maybe even better."

"You have a point," Robin admitted.

Maryl crossed her legs and looked at Robin. "Will you teach me how to skip rocks now?"

Skipping rocks turned into a walk, which led to swimming, then stretching out in the afternoon sun and hiding in the shade to avoid burning. Through it all, they talked. One topic inevitably led to another and time ceased to exist. Robin was lost in a golden moment of sensual and emotional intimacy. Being with Maryl felt so perfect it took on the quality of a dream. She made no effort to understand it or explain it-it just was.

Eventually it occurred to her that it was getting late and if she wanted to get back to camp before dark and her brothers came looking for her, she had better get a move on. She put it off as long as she could, but the falling sun was relentless. "I need to get back to camp," she finally conceded.

Maryl sighed. "Me, too. How far is your camp?"

"A mile? A mile and a half? I'm not sure. If I leave now I should get back before it gets dark."

Maryl got up and pulled her to her feet. "I didn't see a flashlight in your pack. You should go."

Robin collected her clothes and stuffed everything in her pack without speaking. She couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't cheapen the memory of their day. Before hefting the pack she turned to Maryl and sighed.

"I had the best day," Maryl said quietly. "I...um...could I...can I hug you?"

Robin felt as awkward as a 12-year-old until they embraced. Her strength vanished at the feel of Maryl in her arms and she wasn't sure she would ever be able to let go. Maryl was a little shorter,

but their bodies fit like puzzle pieces. "This is the best part of the whole day," she murmured.

"I knew it would be," Maryl whispered.

They finally separated and Robin saw Maryl wipe at her eyes. She felt a little like crying, too, so she didn't say anything. She swung the pack up to her back and looked downstream.

"I know you're with your family," Maryl said haltingly, "but maybe we could do this again."

Robin felt life flowing back into her. "Can you come tomorrow?"

Maryl's smile was almost painful to see. "I'll bring lunch."

"I'll bring more beer. And the sunscreen."

"I'll meet you halfway," Maryl offered.

Robin turned her memory of the river over in her mind and found a place. "There's a small sandy beach three or four turns downstream that gets sun in the morning. There's a willow tree growing out of a split rock across the river from it. I'll meet you there as soon as I can get away."

"I can't wait." Maryl shooed her with her hands. "Go, before it gets too late."

"See you tomorrow," Robin said. She started out along the shore with a quick pace, anxious to make good time. Before she was completely out of sight she turned to take one last look and could see Maryl standing as she had left her. A hand raised and Robin waved back before continuing on her trek.

~***~

Alone again, Maryl suddenly felt vulnerable and she shook out her clothes carefully before putting them back on. It felt very strange at first and almost uncomfortable. She laughed at how quickly she had come to find nudity normal. The entire day had been like a dream of the very best sort and she was sad that it had been necessary to let it end. She had never *connected* with someone quite the way she had with Robin and it gave her hope.

As she headed reluctantly back to her camp, Maryl replayed images from the day. She had been terrified in the first moment she realized she wasn't alone, but terror had faded to incredulity at the sight of a naked woman. When Robin had fallen into the river after rescuing her shoe, Maryl had shaken her head to clear it and rubbed her eyes only to see a dark, svelte woman rising from the water full of life and energy and...*something*...maybe joy in merely being alive. Maryl had been drawn to her at once.

Robin's features would not be termed classically beautiful by most people-there was too much of a chiseled quality to the structure of her face. She fell somewhere in the midst of handsome, striking and elegant. Her eyes and mouth were her best facial features in Maryl's opinion. She

couldn't remember ever seeing that exact shade of light-almost golden-brown in anyone's eyes before and Robin's lips were full enough to tempt the dead. Her dark, nearly black hair fell to her shoulders in a smooth sloping line. She was thin, but strong, and Maryl had been able to see most of her bone structure. She had small, perfectly shaped breasts, a concave stomach and narrow, tight hips. Maryl thought her remarkably lovely.

In her mind's eye, she watched Robin laughing, eating, smiling, listening and soaking in the sun. Maryl had not been able to help flirting. She didn't think she had overdone it, except possibly when she had deliberately pressed her breasts into Robin's back while investigating the horrific scar on her scalp. If not for the sick feeling it had given her, she might very well have borne Robin to the ground right then and taken her chances. Almost from the first moment she had been incredibly attracted to her. Now she was glad she hadn't done it. She was reasonably certain Robin would have been willing, but she had found their emotional intimacy to be far more meaningful to her than any passionate expression could have been. Not that she was against the idea of making love, but better *after* having connected with her than before. Maryl wasn't sure what the morrow would bring, but even if it was only more talking, that was plenty exciting enough for her.

Maryl was back in camp before she was mentally prepared for it. She halted abruptly at the disgusted tone of Linda's voice.

"Finally! We were getting ready to come looking for you. We didn't know if you were hurt or dead or lost or what!"

"I'm fine," Maryl said calmly. "I was only about 30 minutes away."

"We didn't know that!"

Maryl shrugged. "Well, now you do."

Eva stepped in front of Linda and smiled. "Did you have a nice day?"

Maryl couldn't keep a smile from her face. "Perfect. Really, I can't remember when I've had a better or more...rewarding day." She glanced at Linda and couldn't resist. "Thanks for asking."

"We have to look out for each other up here," Linda insisted.

"No harm was done," Eva said to soothe things. "She's back now and it's not even dark."

Maryl thought of Robin, still most likely making her way downstream and hoped that she was all right. Ignoring Linda, she walked over to their supplies and got a drink of water. She drank two full glasses before her thirst seemed to diminish.

"What did you do all day?" Brooke asked.

Maryl took an empty lawn chair and stretched her legs out with a sigh. "I laid in the sun. I

learned how to skip rocks. I opened myself up to the beauty all around me." *I think I fell in love.*
"This is a wonderful spot, Eva. I'm glad I came."

"I'm glad you like it. Does this mean you've gotten over not having a toilet and showers?"

Maryl giggled. "Not entirely, but almost."

Wendy's voice was small. "You must be starving."

"Thirsty, mostly."

"I still say she shouldn't have wandered off like that," Linda said. "*Anything* could have happened."

"Lighten up, Linda." Noreen came to Maryl's defense. "Sometimes people need a little time alone. It helps put things in perspective."

"I think I'll go out again tomorrow," Maryl said while they were thinking about it anyway. "It felt good to be alone. I knew that all of you were here for me, but it was kind of like having only myself to rely on. I know it was only an illusion, but I think it was good for me. I feel happier and more relaxed in my skin after today and I'd like to see if it was a one time thing or if I feel the same tomorrow."

Every one was looking at her with different expressions ranging from anger and fear to curiosity and jealousy. "I think it would be wise if I took a lunch though. I didn't realize how much I would need one. Is that all right with you, Eva?"

"You won't go too far?"

Maryl laughed in relief. "Not more than a 45 minute walk or so. And I'll stay *very* close to the river. I may be stubborn, but I'm not stupid. I'll be careful."

Eva shrugged. "Then I don't see why not. I'm reluctant to put limits on anyone, but if you're not back an hour before it starts to get dark, we'll come looking for you."

"That sounds more than fair."

Kirsten and Brooke were in charge of making dinner and Maryl wandered down to sit at the water's edge. Her tent mates, Wendy and Noreen, joined her.

"Weren't you scared all by yourself?" Wendy asked.

"At first I was a little nervous," Maryl admitted. "My outdoor experience has always been limited to backyards and city parks. But after a while, when bears and mountain lions and rattlesnakes didn't attack me, I started to relax. I almost felt as if there was someone there watching out for me and I knew that nothing bad would happen."

"You seem happier," Noreen said.

Maryl smiled. "It was like a dream. I felt free and safe and peaceful. I didn't ever want it to end. For a while I was just *me*-no expectations or rules or disapproval. I can hardly wait to go back."

"Linda started in on forming up a rescue party about two hours after you left," Noreen snorted with dry humor. "You look perfectly capable of taking care of yourself to me, but you know how Linda is."

"She's bossy," Wendy said shyly.

Maryl looked at Wendy in surprise. She hardly ever said anything so forthright about anyone. Wanting to be supportive of her opinion without being condescending, Maryl rubbed her back with a wide smile. "I think so, too." Wendy blushed and Maryl thought it adorable.

"She can't help it," Noreen added. "She does it when she's worried and scared. Usually when *she* feels threatened, but today I think she was genuinely worried about you. For her own reasons, of course."

"Really? What reasons?"

"Well, I'm just guessing, but I don't think she feels safe here. She doesn't know how to survive on her own in the wilderness and every little sound is a potential threat. That's part of why she follows Eva around more than usual. When she gets scared she gets mad to protect herself. That's why she jumped on you when you got back."

Maryl thought it over and it made sense. "Perhaps, but I, for one, would appreciate it if she weren't so tenacious about it. One would think she's afraid of everything."

"She probably is."

Reluctant to feel sympathy for Linda, Maryl picked up a smooth, flat rock and got to her feet. "Prepare to be impressed," she bragged. Remembering to keep her arm loose and low, she flicked the rock over the water's surface and watched it skip 5 times before skidding and sinking. "Beat that!"

Everyone got into the contest with varying degrees of competitiveness. Brooke and Kirsten even took turns from cooking to give it a try and by the time the sun disappeared, Brooke had emerged the undisputed winner with somewhere between 10 and 12 skips, depending on who had counted. Linda had nine clear skips and the look she gave Maryl's eight skips said that winning wasn't as important to her as being better than Maryl.

She had to wonder how Robin would handle Linda. She doubted Robin would long tolerate her supercilious attitude, but how she would put a stop to it was a mystery. She did know that Robin would have taken the contest easily. She had regularly made throws over ten-her lean, taut body

like a whip as it gracefully coiled back and *struck!*

Maryl laughed at herself for being so inordinately proud of Robin's rock skipping prowess. It didn't seem like much in the scheme of things, but it was something.

There was more laughter than usual during dinner and Maryl wondered why. The others claimed not to have done anything special aside from trying to learn how to weave wild grasses into baskets under Eva's direction. Maryl was actually rather impressed with the baskets. Most of them were a little funny looking, but they had held together and she expressed enthusiasm for their efforts. Linda had nothing to show as she had destroyed it for not being perfect. Maryl felt a flicker of pity for her.

She and Noreen were the after dinner clean-up crew and she pressured Noreen into letting her handle it alone to 'make up for worrying everyone'. She wouldn't have minded working with Noreen, but she wanted to be alone with her thoughts.

I wonder what she's doing right this minute. Maybe she's washing the dishes, too. Maryl grinned. *Can I get any cornier? She's probably sitting around the fire with her family and I'll bet they're laughing and joking. At least they have beer. I wonder if Robin is telling them about meeting me. I wonder what they think about her meeting me tomorrow. I wonder if they're as great as she seems to think they are. If they can be judged by how she is, they might be. It hardly matters though. I'll probably never meet them.* Maryl glanced at her companions. *Ah, jeez. Brooke is crying again. I suppose I shouldn't resent it-I know how painful it is to be cheated on. Lord knows it's happened often enough to me. I wonder if Robin would...?* She shook her head with distaste at the direction of her thoughts. *Don't even think about it. A couple more days and I'll never see her again. It's a good thing Janelle isn't here. We've been friends so long she would know in a heartbeat that I spent the day with someone special.*

Maryl pattered as long as she could and eventually felt she had no option but to join the others. She stuck a marshmallow on a stick and held it over the coals as Brooke continued to wallow in self-pity.

"...I mean, how many times in your life does love happen to you? What if Kimmy was my last time?"

"Come now!" Eva laughed. "You're only what? Twenty-six? You've got another 40 or 50 years of life ahead of you. Do you really think that you'll never love anyone again?"

"I'm saying...*what if?*" Brooke cried. "The way I felt about her-it was so strong and so pure-what if I never feel that way again?"

"You probably won't," Kirsten said matter-of-factly. "People aren't exactly the same. Why should love be exactly the same?"

Maryl knew she was right, having experienced different kinds and levels of love herself, but Brooke looked crushed and disbelieving.

"Usually," Noreen added, "the more you do something, the better at it you'll be-*if* you learn from

your mistakes. I look at every relationship in terms of what I learned from it."
Linda cocked her head with interest. "What did you learn from Terri?"

"I learned that when someone says 'I don't want to hurt you', it means they know something you don't."

Linda laughed with understanding and leaned over the fire to high five Noreen. A trickle of laughter followed the gesture-except for Brooke. Maryl could tell she wasn't getting it.

Eva took Brooke's hand. "What did you learn with Kimmy? When you look back over your relationship with her is there anything that stands out?"

"Everything!" Brooke wailed. "She taught me how to love and what it means to be a lesbian and..."

"That's not what we mean," Kirsten said impatiently. "What did you learn about how you relate to another person in an intimate relationship? What was your biggest mistake?"

Brooke was clueless. She looked about for help and found none. Maryl stopped feeling sorry for her. She seemed to be oblivious to anything but self-pity and grief. Maryl was far more interested in her marshmallow. She just about had it to a perfect golden brown-the same color as Robin's eyes-and she was looking forward to eating it.

"Maybe you could think about it," Eva suggested. "What about you, Wendy? What did you learn?"

Wendy spoke quietly, but with a small measure of confidence. "That it takes more than words to make a commitment. It takes honor and integrity and faith."

Maryl nodded in agreement and smiled as Wendy's eyes touched hers.

"What about you, Maryl?"

She looked over at Kirsten and wished she hadn't asked. "That I should stop handing out house keys indiscriminately."

There was a smattering of laughter, but Kirsten leaned forward intently. "That may be true, but you're avoiding the question."

Maryl nodded and inspected her marshmallow again. "I guess I learned that women don't communicate directly and that when they communicate something indirectly on a regular basis, you should listen."

"What do you mean?" Linda asked.

"Well...?" Maryl popped the marshmallow into her mouth while she worked out how to explain.

"Women don't say *'I want to do this or that'*. Instead, they'll say *'I'd like to...'* or *'Wouldn't it be nice if...'* or *'I wish that...'*. We tend not to say what we want. We hint at it. And we rarely *tell* people what to do-even if we get paid to. We ask and we suggest. I would never say *'Give that to me'*. I'd probably say *'Would you please hand that to me?'* Or *'Could I get you to hand me that?'* Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," Noreen said slowly. "Now that you mention it, it makes sense. I'm a supervisor at work and a lot of times I'll tell the men to do something and they brush me off. It always kind of blew me away, but now that I'm thinking about it, I always *ask* them to do things. Like they have an option. I *feel* like I'm telling them to do things, but I'm not."

"Exactly," Maryl nodded. "The second part of what I learned is that when a woman suggests or wonders about the same thing repeatedly, she wants it. And sooner or later, if you don't help her do something about it, she'll find an opportunity to get it on her own. Maybe if I had understood that before, I would have seen what Alaine was going to do. She talked about it often enough-I just never took it as a serious desire. Maybe if I had I could have protected myself."

Kirsten nodded sagely. "Interesting."

Noreen looked at Kirsten. "What did you learn?"

Kirsten seemed unusually somber as she spoke. "You never know when it's the last time, so give every single time your complete and undivided attention."

Maryl caught Eva's look of utter sympathy for Kirsten out of the corner of her eye. She had never heard Kirsten's story. Only that her last lover had left because she wasn't getting what she needed. Whatever that was.

Her thoughts turned again to Robin and she stretched her feet out towards the fire. She tuned out the ongoing conversation and stared up at the stars. The air was so clear up in the mountains and without the lights of the city to interfere there looked to be 10 times as many stars as she was accustomed to. The Big Dipper was the only constellation she recognized and she found herself wishing she knew the names of the others. There were planets in the night sky as well, but she didn't know which part of the sky to look in to find them and how to tell them from stars. Robin would know. She just knew she would.

She imagined lying in Robin's arms and following her finger as her husky voice pointed out which stars belonged in which constellations and the stories ancient peoples had devised to explain them.

"What do you think, Maryl?"

Her head popped up as if on a string. "Excuse me?"

Linda sighed impatiently. "Love at first sight. Do you believe in it or not?"

Maryl looked at the expectant faces and thought of the incomparable day she had just experienced. "I don't know."

"That's it? I don't know?" Linda sneered. "You usually have so much more to say. I'm a little disappointed in you."

Maryl sighed as obviously as she could without flouncing. Linda's attitude had just crossed the line. "I seem to do that a lot, Linda. My opinions usually seem to set you off. I thought I'd keep it simple for once and see if that made you feel any better about me."

Linda's eyes opened wide and she asked with disbelief, "Are you patronizing me?"

Maryl shrugged insolently. "I'm a little tired of *being* patronized, so I guess I am."

"I'm not patronizing you." Linda seemed mad and confused at the same time. As if she weren't sure what she was supposed to feel.

Maryl, on the other hand, was quite certain she was angry and she made every effort to keep herself under control. "No matter what I say or do, I feel like you don't approve of me. It feels like you scoff at my opinions, dismiss my ideas and mock my feelings. It seems like you find it amusing when it's my turn to clean up. It looked to me like the most important thing to you about the rock skipping contest was that you beat me. I feel slighted and ridiculed at every turn. I don't know what it is about me that you take offense at, but you go right ahead. You don't intimidate me a bit. You just piss me off." Maryl stood abruptly and looked at the open-mouthed expressions on the other women. "I apologize to the rest of you for this little tantrum. I hope it doesn't ruin the rest of your evening."

Maryl took a deep breath and shook her arms as if shaking off water. She felt calmer immediately. "I've had a really long day. I'm going to bed. Good night."

Maryl was inside the tent she shared with Wendy and Noreen before the conversation picked back up.

"I am *not* patronizing her," Linda insisted.

"I've got to be honest." Noreen said clearly. "You sounded patronizing to me."

"What did I say?"

The quiver in Brooke's voice was gone. "You told her that you were disappointed in her for not having more of an opinion."

"But that's not patronizing!" Linda objected.

"What was it then?" Eva asked. "How did you want her to feel when you said it?"

There was a long silent moment and Maryl could barely hear Wendy.

"I like Maryl."

"So do I," Kirsten said.

Except for Linda, the others chimed their agreement and Maryl smiled as she prepared for bed. She truly didn't care one way or the other about how her relationship with Linda turned out. She had said what she wanted to say and it was done. She zipped her sleeping bag all the way up, curled on her side, fixed Robin firmly in her mind and went to sleep.

~***~

Maryl was the first to wake in the morning. She carefully got out of her sleeping bag and went outside without waking Wendy and Noreen. The sun wasn't up yet, though the sky had lightened just enough that she didn't need a flashlight. Grabbing her jacket for added warmth against the morning chill, she made her way to the makeshift latrine and took care of business. She washed her hands in the river and approached the camp stove with trepidation. She had been shown how to use it more than once, but she still expected it to blow up.

Her first inclination was to head down river, but she wanted to reassure the others that she was still a part of the group. She hoped that making coffee would alleviate any feelings of rejection they might feel. Maryl was sensitive to the fact that someone could come looking for her on a whim and she didn't want that to happen. Anything she could do to lessen that possibility was worth the extra effort.

She pumped the little handle, turned the knob, said a little prayer to the gods of all campers and struck the match. The burst of blue flame made her jump, but the expected catastrophe didn't materialize and she patted herself on the back. Setting the coffee to perk, she stood as close as she dared and warmed her hands. The muted roar of the camp stove mingled with the sound of the river and an occasional rustle from the tents. It was quiet in a way that Maryl found very interesting. She could hear the occasional bird and what had to be pinecones and small twigs dropping from the trees, but there was an underlying stillness she had never heard before. It sounded like waiting and she let it heighten her anticipation of seeing Robin again.

The smell of coffee brought Eva out of her tent and Maryl poured them both a cup. "Good morning, Eva."

"Morning. You're up early."

"I went to bed early."

"True." Eva crouched with her coffee next to the fire pit and poked at it with a stick. She found some coals under the ash and soon had the fire going again.

"You're good at this whole camping thing," Maryl said in a soft tone.

"My dad worked in the Forest Service. We camped a lot. He thought it was an important life skill." Eva smiled up at her. "I can catch fish with my bare hands, too. If there were any worth eating around here, I'd show you."

Maryl grinned. "I believe you."

Eva sat back and put her stocking feet close to the blaze. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm good."

"Here, sit down. If you don't mind I'd kind of like to talk to you a bit before the others wake up."

Maryl pulled a chair close and copied her pose. She was a little worried that Eva was upset about her histrionics the night before.

"You seem to be having a harder time than most in adjusting to the group."

Maryl nodded in agreement. "I was thinking the same thing myself. Would it be better if I stopped coming?"

Eva frowned and shook her head. "Please... That's not what I mean at all. I'm just wondering if there's something I can do to help."

"I don't think so," Maryl said honestly. "Of course, I bring a lot of it on myself. I probably shouldn't have said what I did to Linda last night."

Eva's voice dropped markedly so as not to be overheard by anyone who might be lying awake in the tents. "Personally, I think she had it coming. She treats you differently than the others and I haven't been sure what to do about it. I apologize for that. I thought you handled it perfectly. I was impressed."

Maryl hid her smile behind her coffee.

"You weren't nasty about it," Eva continued. "You didn't blame her for anything and you took responsibility for your feelings. I thought you explained very well how you were feeling and you didn't waste a lot of time doing it. I can't even accurately call it a fight. How much of the conversation did you hear after you went to bed?"

"Very little. I went right to sleep."

Eva sighed. "That's too bad. The others were very supportive of your feelings. They've seen how she treats you, too. They stood up for you. It's hard to say if Linda's attitude will improve- frankly, I don't think it likely-but I think she got the message that if she messes with you she messes with everyone."

Maryl considered. "It feels good that the others support me, but I don't need them to stand up for me."

"*They* need it," Eva emphasized. "It gives them confidence."

Maryl saw a little more clearly how Eva saw the group. "*Why* does Linda hate me? Did I do something...?"

"She doesn't hate you, Maryl. She feels threatened by you and she's trying to protect herself."

"But, how am I threatening her?"

Eva adjusted the fire before responding. "I don't know if you see it, but Linda *can* be charming and she *does* care."

"I know she does. Not with me, but I see her laughing and joking sometimes."

Eva grew thoughtful. "She's been coming to the meetings for almost three years. She's my longest member. Because of that, I think she feels a little territorial. I allow it because...well, I'm not a therapist so I can't say I really know what I'm doing. I try to make that very clear."

"You do," Maryl reassured her.

"Good." Eva looked relieved. "Linda is useful to me in several ways. First, she draws attention away from me as an authority figure. It keeps women from becoming too dependent on me. She also gets impatient when someone gets too deep into self-pity. Her usual reaction is to get sarcastic with them, but it tends to shock them out of it. I think her impatience was part of why she wanted to go looking for you yesterday. She may have thought you were seeking solitude so you could wallow in private."

"But I wasn't."

"You made that very clear," Eva grinned. "And I think that's why she seemed a little nastier than usual last night."

"Ah...!" Maryl thought it made sense.

"Another reason is that Linda's usually the one to push the conversation in new directions when it begins to stagnate. Noreen does it, too, but she doesn't have your...dynamic personality."

She was still too cold to blush, so Maryl smiled. "Thank you."

"Now, as far as I'm concerned, her most valuable function in the group is that she irritates everyone to some degree."

Maryl shook her head. "Why is that useful?"

"She gives everyone someone to hate besides themselves."

Maryl's chuckle started small and she covered her mouth to keep it that way. "I'm sorry. It's just so sad."

Eva smiled at her humor. "I know."

Maryl hitched her jacket tighter. "So how do I threaten her?"

"They like you. It's hard not to."

Maryl ducked her head to hide the embarrassment she felt at being pleased.

"You're beautiful and smart and fun and you don't *need* the group the way she thinks you should. She doesn't know how to compete with that and it's not in her nature to accept and enjoy it. I think she feels that she's losing her position of influence to you. If that happens, what will she be to us?"

Maryl shook her head in dismay. "But, I'm not trying to take over..."

"I know that," Eva interrupted. "But Linda sees *now*, not next month. I don't mean to judge the depth of your pain and fear, but you aren't as swamped by it as most of the people who come to our meetings. In my opinion, I don't think you'll be a long-term member. You're more than welcome to prove me wrong, but I think you're what I call a self-healer. You don't need to *experience* your pain or have someone fix you. You just need a sympathetic place to vent for a while and then your heart will heal and you'll move on as good as new."

Maryl was fascinated at Eva's insights.

"Noreen is a self-healer, too. I'm actually surprised she's hung on as long as she has. She seems to be waiting for something." Eva watched her over her coffee. "I'm not saying anything upsetting, am I?"

"No," Maryl admitted. "It's a little like hearing your horoscope. It's never anything you didn't know about yourself, but hearing it out loud is somehow so rewarding."

Eva grinned with obvious affection. "Well, to be fair, you're also stubborn, mouthy as hell and a little intolerant at times, but not enough to be a real pain in the ass about it."

"It means so much to me that you noticed." Maryl smiled widely. "Let me ask you something. Why do you run this group? What do you get out of it?"

"I collect broken hearts the way some people collect stray cats. I like trying to fix them up and turning them loose on the world."

"But, what do you get out of it?"

Eva stared at her as if trying to decide what she could safely say. "It makes me feel good about myself. I feel like a better person when someone gets happy again. Like I've done something magical."

"You've got your work cut out for you with Linda," she teased. "What about Kirsten?"

Eva's face closed up. "Kirsten may be the most damaged of them all. I worry about her constantly."

Maryl realized instantly that Eva was safeguarding information about Kirsten that no one else knew. She also realized that it was probably something she would rather not know. "Well, I appreciate all you do for us. This whole trip probably took a lot of work and planning." Maryl winked. "I'll try to behave myself."

Eva rubbed at her eyes dramatically. "I knew I should have packed a bottle of whiskey for emergencies."

Maryl laughed and heard the sound of a zipper. She glanced over and saw Linda coming out of the large tent. She whispered to Eva. "Time to make peace. Wish me luck."

Eva whispered back. "Pretend it never happened. If you apologize she'll believe that you really were in the wrong."

Maryl thought fast and patted Eva's shoulder as she got up. "Good morning, Linda. There's coffee, but I'm not proud of it."

Linda looked at her in confusion. "What's wrong with it?"

"Technically? Nothing: I thought I made it just like you showed me, but I must have forgotten something. It's not as good as yours." Maryl hated kissing ass, but in order to preserve some peace for everyone else she made herself do it.

Linda reached over and turned the flame of the camp stove down just a bit. "You've got to simmer it. Give it time to develop some flavor."

Simmer it my ass! "I'll try to remember that. Thanks." Maryl turned away immediately to keep from laughing in her face. The look of appreciation on Eva's face made her glad she had.

Anxious to be on her way as soon as possible, Maryl went to her tent and quietly straightened her things. She emptied her backpack into her sleeping bag and stuffed her towel back into it. She picked out what to wear and set it aside.

"Are you leaving already?" Wendy asked.

Maryl jumped at the sound of her voice. "Not yet. I'm just cleaning up my corner."

"Eva wants us to pick berries today up in the field where we parked the van. She promised us a cobbler for dessert tonight."

"That sounds good," Maryl said truthfully.

Wendy's eyes held a plea. "You could come with us."

Maryl felt bad for her. "Sorry. I feel like I've already made a commitment to my heart. Maybe tomorrow."

"Okay."

Maryl could tell from the relief in Wendy's eyes that she had just heard a promise to stay in camp the next day. She wanted to kick herself for not being more careful. What made it worse was that she genuinely liked her and didn't want to hurt her feelings. She couldn't think of one single thing that she could say to get out of it and make Wendy feel good at the same time.

Noreen rolled over and Maryl couldn't help but grin at her tousled expression. "Hey, you. How did you sleep?"

"Shoot me," Noreen grumbled. "I'm too damn old for this."

"You're not old," Wendy objected.

Noreen groaned as she sat up. She licked her teeth as if tasting her mouth and looked calmly at Wendy. "And I'm not drunk. That just leaves stupid."

Wendy's laugh was like a silver wind chime in a tropical storm and it made Maryl happy just to hear it. "Do it again!"

"What?"

"Laugh! Do it again. Please?"

Wendy tried to hide in her sleeping bag.

"Come on, Noreen. Help me!" Maryl went after her and began tickling, trying to coax that delightful sound from her again. Somehow it got all out of control and turned into a free for all.

They jerked to a stop at Kirsten's voice at the tent door. "What are you guys doing in there?"

Maryl felt like a child caught stealing cookies. "Nothing."

"May I come in?"

Noreen giggled. "What's the pass word?"

There was a long silence and then Kirsten said: "Sauerkraut."

"Wow!" Maryl breathed loudly. "Even I didn't know that. Come on in!"

Kirsten unzipped the tent flap and wiggled inside. "What's going on?"

Maryl tried to straighten her hair out so she wouldn't look so disheveled. "We were trying to make Wendy laugh. It's adorable. It makes you happy just hearing it."

Wendy buried her face in her knees and Noreen ruffled her hair. It only took the three of them a few minutes to make her laugh again. "See?" Maryl laughed. "Isn't that the cutest thing you ever heard?"

"You should laugh more often," Kirsten said encouragingly. "It suits you."

Now that the shenanigans were over, Maryl turned her hand to cleaning up the mess they had made. Most of their belongings were mixed up and together they sorted them out.

"Are you still planning on going for a walk?" Kirsten asked.

Cautious after her earlier faux pas, Maryl made sure not to leave an opening for uninvited company. "Yes. I understand you're going to pick berries for a cobbler. I can't wait to taste it."

Noreen frowned. "Wait a minute. What are you going to do for us?"

Maryl blinked. "Huh?"

Kirsten smiled wickedly. "She's right. We're going to be out in the sun with thorns and bugs for entertainment and you'll be goofing off. How is it fair that you should get to enjoy the fruits of our labor? What are you going to do for us that we should let you?"

Maryl looked with disbelief at the three women. "What do you want? Someone to do your chores?"

Wendy squeaked. "She should have to sing for her supper."

"Oh, no," Maryl objected. "I am *not* singing. Forget it." Their smiles told her they were serious and she stuffed her things carelessly into her sleeping bag.

"You don't have to sing," Noreen comforted her. "Unless you want cobbler."

Maryl set her jaw firmly as they continued to tease her. When they saw she wasn't going to be any fun about it, they spilled out of the tent to inform the rest of the camp. Maryl pounded on her sleeping bag, but didn't feel any better. She resigned herself to not getting any of the special

dessert and refused to leave the tent until breakfast was ready.

~***~

Maryl kicked rocks and used a stick to swat at the tall grasses along the shore. When she reached the previous day's beach, she sat down to sulk. First had been her inadvertent commitment to stay in camp the next day, then the ribbing over what she would sing after dinner, followed by a 10 minute argument with Brooke over the size of the lunch she was taking. Considering that she had not eaten at camp the day before, she felt perfectly justified. They had more than enough food, but Brooke seemed to feel that Maryl was snatching the food right out of her mouth. No one else seemed to have a problem with it so Maryl finally hefted her pack, turned her back on Brooke and left. The down side was that she now felt frustrated with life in general.

To top it off, Linda had smugly announced that she was too chicken to sing for them and Maryl felt obligated to prove her wrong. The only camp type songs she knew were Kumbaya and This Little Light of Mine, but damned if she was going to sing either of those. They could eat their stupid cobbler right in front of her-see if she cared!

When she felt a little better she took off her clothes. By some miracle she had not burned in the sun yesterday and she folded her clothes on top of the lunch in her pack. Settling the pack back on her shoulders she set off. It took another twenty minutes to reach the spot Robin had suggested. If the willow tree-it really did grow out of a split rock-hanging over the river had not been enough to point it out to her, Robin had apparently stopped on her way back to camp and used rocks to put an X on the sand.

The beach was just a strip of sand roughly 10 feet deep and 25 feet long. A wall of rock surrounded it and just downstream from it was what looked like a decent swimming hole. Maryl couldn't tell how deep it was, but it was a beautiful place. If she had not stopped out of an excess of caution the day before, she probably would have chosen this very spot to spend the day.

From the beach, the willow was magnificent. It seemed to lean towards her: wispy tendrils dipping into the river's current only to pull out and dip again. Maryl waded through the branches and into a cavern of cool stillness. It seemed like a good place to leave their lunch so Maryl pulled her towel free and left the pack in a dry spot. The day had not yet become hot and she waded back to the beach to stretch out on the sand and wait.

When she thought about the time she had spent with Robin, her clearest memories were of what Robin had said and done rather than the shape of her breasts, the ripe fullness of her lips or the length of her legs. Granted, she hoped to get a little closer to that body today, but she looked forward to the feeling of transcending herself that she had felt in Robin's company. There was something compelling about the way she felt with Robin. She felt vital and free and inspired like never before.

It was hard to tell time with nothing to mark its passing, but it seemed that she had waited for an hour or more and she began to feel foolish. *Am I insane? What am I doing? Here I am, sitting naked in the middle of nowhere waiting for a woman I barely know to show up and make me feel*

good. Does that make any sense? How stupid do you have to be to put your hopes on a stranger? Even if all you hoped for was one more perfect day?

She probably changed her mind. She seemed to be excited about today, but maybe her family talked her out of it. I know Eva and the others would have done the same if I had told them what happened yesterday. I shouldn't have told her that I was with a support group. She probably thinks I'm crazy and she's likely right. Maybe I should go back to camp and help pick berries. At least then I wouldn't have to sing or look like a coward.

The X made out rocks seemed to mock her and she idly rearranged them. *A big fat zero. That's what this day has been. Maybe if she comes back here tomorrow or the next day she'll see this and know that I waited for her and she'll feel bad. It's childish, I know, but if she thinks I'm crazy I've got nothing to lose.*

Maryl felt disgusted with herself and she shook out her towel before wading across the river to retrieve her pack. There just didn't seem to be any point to waiting. As she ducked between the willow's branches, she thought she heard something and turned to look downstream. She had not been able to see very far from the beach and now that her perspective had changed she could see that Robin was less than a hundred yards away. Her heart lifted immediately and she stepped back into the sun and waved.

Robin was wearing her pack and dragging an inner tube through the water with something in it and it was slowing her down. Maryl wanted to run to her, but that felt foolish, too, so she waited. With each step Robin took, Maryl's mood lifted until she was almost laughing as Robin stopped in front of her.

"Sorry I took so long," Robin sighed. "I had to run an unexpected errand of mercy and then my great idea," she pointed at the inner tube, "turned out to mean slogging through the current and..."

"I'm just glad you're here," Maryl giggled. "I was giving up. I was going to leave and now you're here."

Robin very deliberately looked her over from head to toe and Maryl felt her skin tingling in response. "I thought I dreamed you," Robin said somberly. "I don't think I really believed that you would be here."

"You went to an awful lot of trouble for a dream," Maryl quipped.

"Some dreams are worth it." A heartbeat later Robin blushed as if she had just realized the implications of her words. She stepped quickly through the branches and tied the inner tube to the trunk. "I brought beer, water and plenty of ice."

Maryl leaned over to look as Robin flipped the top off the ice chest. "Maybe I should put our lunch in there."

"Good idea."

Maryl tossed sandwiches and fruit in the chest and took out a bottle of water before closing it. Robin was still wearing her pack and Maryl gestured at it with her eyes. "What have you got in there?"

Robin grinned. "Come on. You'll like this."

Maryl followed her across the river and knelt in the sand. Robin crouched with her pack between her knees and Maryl saw her eyes go to the circle of rocks.

"I could have sworn I left a hug for you."

Maryl realized how the O complemented the X and at the hopeful invitation in Robin's eyes, she slowly leaned over the pack and pressed their lips together. As kisses go it was chaste, but definitely promising and Maryl sat back on her heels with a smile. From the smile on Robin's face she knew that it was just a beginning.

Robin unzipped the pack and pulled out a blanket. She stood and shook it out to lie on the sand and Maryl helped to secure the corners with rocks. Robin moved the pack onto it and they both sat. "I kept thinking about the things you claimed to miss. I couldn't manage a bed so I brought this."

Maryl laughed out loud as a blow up air mattress was taken from the pack.

"I know it's not much," Robin admitted, "but it was the best I could do on short notice."

"You're so sweet." Maryl's heart melted.

"There's more." Robin reached back into the pack and pulled out a paper sack. "This is why I took so long."

Maryl peeked inside and then upended the bag onto the blanket. Razors, shaving gel, soap, shampoo and a body scrubber tumbled out.

"I made a run down to that little mini mart/bait shop at the bottom of the hill. They didn't carry books and the magazines were limited to Field & Stream and Penthouse. Sorry. If you're really desperate I could tell you stories."

Maryl was dumbfounded. It had to be a 45-minute drive down to the store over bad road. This wasn't just a spur of the moment gift. Robin had gone to a great deal of effort to do something nice for her. It wasn't the money she had spent that affected Maryl so deeply. There was only about 10 dollars worth of merchandise on the blanket. She tried to remember the last time someone had done something so considerate. "I don't know what to say."

Robin shrugged. "You don't have to say anything. I wanted to do something to thank you for

yesterday. It's been a long...long time since I felt so happy and free. I just wanted to give something back to you for that."

"But, you already gave me more than I gave you. You rescued my clothes and fed me and made me feel safe. It was a perfect day because of you." Maryl waved at the jumble of travel-size hygiene products. "This is too much."

"I only spent about twelve dollars."

"That's not what I mean, Robin. It's not the money. It's the time and thought you put into it. I'm flattered and I thank you for it, but it wasn't necessary."

"That's what made it fun. Look," Robin said earnestly. "I did it because I wanted to. Not because I thought I had to or that you expected it. Let's not make it into a big thing. Just enjoy it. If it's going to make you uncomfortable, I'll put it back in my pack and we'll forget it."

Maryl picked up the body scrubber and rubbed it between her hands. "I don't want to forget it, but now I feel indebted."

"Damn," Robin sighed. She rubbed her face with both hands before looking into Maryl's eyes. "My motives were not entirely...pure."

"What do you mean?"

Robin looked embarrassed and put one hand over her eyes while she spoke. "There's something incredibly erotic about watching a woman bathing and shaving her legs. I only went to all the trouble in hopes that I could watch and now you know what a pervert I am."

Robin's admission wiped away all of Maryl's discomfort and replaced it with sexual excitement. The certainty that they would make love before the day was over settled on her like the warmth of the sun. "In that case, I accept." She picked up the shampoo and headed for the river. She stopped ankle deep in the water and daringly turned to look over her shoulder. "If you're going to be a voyeur, you might as well have a front row seat. You can be my shower caddy."

Maryl watched long enough to see Robin frantically gathering everything else into her hands and then waded into deeper water. She dunked and wet her hair thoroughly. Putting a generous amount of shampoo in her hand, she handed the small bottle to Robin and began to lather her hair. Maryl closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was alone. She knew that she was acting out a fantasy for Robin and she wanted it to be worth the long drive she had made. She could feel Robin's eyes on her breasts as she vigorously scrubbed her scalp and it made her warm.

After rinsing her hair, Maryl took the hand soap and body scrubber from Robin's hands and washed her face before moving to shallower water. She rubbed the soap liberally on the scrubber and set the bar on a rock. Ignoring Robin's presence as she walked around in front of her to watch, Maryl started with her arms and hands. She tried not to think about what she was doing and let her body move through its daily cleansing ritual. It was hard to ignore the fact that her

every move was being watched. Her breasts seemed especially sensitive to the rough surface and she took her time, pleased to see that Robin's gaze was spellbound.

Maryl just didn't have the audacity to finger her own genitals for someone else's benefit in broad daylight: at least, not on a second date. She did what was necessary and moved on to her legs, hoping that Robin wouldn't feel cheated. When she had scrubbed everything she could reach, she held the scrubber out. "Would you do my back?"

Robin all but threw the razors and shaving gel onto the rock and took it from her hand. Maryl lifted her hair out of the way and gave her access. She closed her eyes in order to magnify the sensations Robin's touch evoked. The longer it went on, the more she wanted. She was breathing heavily through her mouth when Robin finished. Her heart rate was still steady, but it was beating much more forcefully than usual.

Maryl staggered forward and dove beneath the surface to rinse off. The current carried her further than she wanted to go and she turned to swim back upstream. Wringing her hair out, she walked past Robin and her soapy hands. Making room on the rock to sit, she picked up the shaving gel and reached for Robin's hand.

Robin dropped to her knees and swished her hands in the water. Maryl squirted gel into her palm and let Robin lift her foot to place it between her breasts. She took a deep breath as Robin's hands began turning the gel into lather on her calf. When Robin stopped at her knee, Maryl guided her hands to mid-thigh with a smile.

Her own hands were shaking as she picked up the razor and Robin took it from her fingers. "Let me."

Maryl let her head fall back and shook her hair to let it dry as the razor was cautiously drawn over her skin. Robin's touch was gentle and meticulous, but Maryl could feel her heartbeat under the sole of her foot and she had to wonder how Robin could keep her hands so steady while her heart was racing so. The gel left behind a soapy film and Robin's hand searched over it diligently for any stray hairs. When she was satisfied, she lowered Maryl's foot into the water and rinsed the film away.

"Did I knick you anywhere?"

Maryl shook her head and lifted her other foot to place it over Robin's heart. Robin pushed into it a little and picked up the gel. Maryl watched her hands at work and tried to imagine what they would feel like when they touched her most tender places. It was all she could do to keep from sliding down into Robin's lap and finding out right then.

Robin continued as though content to do nothing else all day. Maryl watched her closely as she lifted her free foot up to rest in the curls between Robin's legs. Her hands stilled and her eyes closed as Maryl smiled knowingly.

"I'm almost done," Robin whispered.

"Okay." Maryl obediently lowered her foot and held her growing desire in check. Robin's hands went about their task and she was rinsing her leg in short order. Maryl eased into the water and into Robin's hungry kiss. It took a moment for their mouths to learn each other and then everything was right in the world.

Robin was the one to pull back and lead her out of the water. They fell to the blanket and their bodies intertwined as hands began to roam. Maryl lost track of who was doing what to whom. It all felt so good that it didn't matter.

At some point it changed and Maryl was hovering on the edge. Robin wasn't quite where Maryl needed her to be, but then Maryl reached down and guided her fingers. "There," she urged.

"I thought you might be too sensitive," Robin said soft and low.

Maryl shook her head and lifted her hips to encourage her. "Don't stop," she moaned.

Robin snuggled into her side and ran her tongue around a receptive nipple. "I won't."

Maryl fell into pleasure like she had waiting for it all her life. It built beyond its normal boundaries and she held her breath as it lingered for a moment and then flung her over the edge. "Stop," she panted. "Stop." Robin moved to lie on her and Maryl put weak arms around her slim body.

"Was it okay?"

Maryl smiled at the worry in her voice. "Oh, it was good. It was very good."

"You were so quiet. I wasn't sure..."

Maryl rolled over and put Robin under her. "And how will you be? Will you be silent or will you echo from the hills?" Robin blushed and Maryl set about finding out.

~***~

She woke up spooned into Robin's back, the memory of her sweet moans still singing in her ears. A wave of desire made her whimper and she pressed her lips into Robin's shoulder. It wasn't enough and she raked her teeth over the spot. She heard Robin hiss in pain, but her hips wriggled back into her. Encouraged, Maryl carefully nipped her way down to slender hips. She lifted Robin's leg and bit her inner thigh, then buried her lips and tongue in Robin's sweet flesh. She tried to make it last, but Robin came a short time later.

Maryl lay her head on Robin's thigh. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not much."

She smiled at the lie, but let it go. "You shouldn't have let me sleep. I don't want to waste a single moment of this day."

Robin's fingers brushed through her hair. "It wasn't a waste for me. It was so sweet having your arms around me while you napped."

Maryl played absently with the dark curls inches from her face. "I hoped for this, but I had no idea how perfect it would be. I would have been content to spend another day just talking."

Robin stretched languorously. "I'd like it if we could do both."

"What did you tell your family about me?"

"Nothing, but they knew anyway."

"How?"

"They're my family. They know me too well. And then there's Bruce."

Maryl looked up at Robin's face. "What about Bruce?"

Robin sat up with a nervous expression. "I have to tell you...He probably knows we've been making love."

"How could he know that?"

"I don't know," Robin shook her head. "He says it's like being aware of your big toe. For the most part, you don't think about it. It's just there. But if it hurts or feels especially good your awareness of it increases. Apparently he has an awareness of me inside of him and when I'm happy or sad he knows it."

Maryl sat up and thought about it. She placed her hand on Robin's breast and looked into her eyes. "So, he can feel this?"

Robin shook her head. "I don't think so. He's never admitted it anyway. What he feels is...emotional intensity. He knows I'm happy and he *may* know that part of what I feel is sexual."

"That must be pretty uncomfortable for you at times."

"For a long time I considered it a nightmare. But then I realized that my mom can do the same thing just by looking at me. And it's got to be harder for him than it is for me. I know all the time that if something really terrible were to happen to me, my brother would know and he would find me. I feel bad sometimes that I don't feel him in the same way."

"So he knew yesterday that you met someone?"

"Not exactly. He knew that I was inexplicably happy and it only made sense to him that I met you."

Maryl snuggled into her arms. "I've heard of twins being separated at birth who live out similar lives and even twins who can feel each other's pain, so it doesn't sound too strange."

"I'm inclined to think that since we're fraternal twins it's not a lack on my part, but a gift on his. It's like I'm an emotional radio station and he's the receiver."

"Do you ever feel obligated to feel good for his benefit?"

"Sure. But I think we all feel that to some degree. Don't you ever hide your feelings and only show people the good?"

Maryl snorted. "Of course."

"It's like that for me, too. The only difference is that he knows when it's a lie. But like I said, my mom sees through me, too, and to a lesser extent, so do my other brothers. But that's sort of what family is. People who know you."

Maryl held back the urge to say that not all families were like that. She didn't want to introduce anything depressing into their conversation. It occurred to her that she was doing exactly what they had just talked about and the irony made her smile.

"What did they think about all this at your camp?" Robin asked.

"I didn't tell them either." She remembered that she had to sing and groaned.

"What is it?"

Maryl shook her head and started to get up. "Something they want me to do later. I'm not talking about it without a beer in my hand. Are you hungry?"

Robin started to get up and Maryl stopped her. She waded across the river and untied the inner tube. Dragging it behind her, she pulled it up onto the sand next to the blanket and opened the cooler. "I hope you like peanut butter and jam sandwiches."

"What kind of jam?"

"Strawberry."

"I love it."

Maryl handed her a sandwich and a beer, then helped herself.

"What do you have to do later?"

Maryl took a long drink of beer and her eyes watered at the cold bite of it. "Eva promised to make us a cobbler if we picked berries today. Since I'm 'goofing off', as they put it, they seem to think that I should have to do something special for them in order to share in it."

"And that would be?"

Maryl grimaced. "Sing."

Robin grinned. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"You haven't heard me sing."

"You have a beautiful voice. I'd love to hear you sing."

Maryl bit into her sandwich and shook her head.

"Come on," Robin pleaded. "Sing something for me."

"No."

Robin's eyes opened wide. "No?"

"No."

"I'd sing for you if you asked me."

Maryl shrugged. "I'm not asking."

Robin laughed in disbelief. "You allow me to make love to you, but you won't sing for me?"

"Singing and making love are not at all related."

"Then I must not be doing it right."

Maryl rolled her eyes and held up a hand. "Don't *even* try and guilt me into it."

"Will you at least tell me why you won't sing?"

"Because I'm tone deaf. I can't sing."

"Oh, please. Don't you listen to the radio? Half of today's best selling recording artists can't sing. That doesn't stop them."

"Well, they all sound good to me. I can't tell the difference."

"I refuse to believe that someone with a voice as beautiful as yours can't sing."

"I guess it was a trade off. I got a nice speaking voice and no singing ability." Robin continued to eat her lunch, but she was obviously planning something and it made Maryl nervous. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm trying to decide how to make you sing for me."

Maryl laughed. "Give it up, Robin. It's never going to happen. You can't make me sing."

Robin finished her sandwich and reached for an apple. "I have four brothers. They provided me with a thorough education in the arts of manipulation and force. I'm reasonably sure that I can make you do anything I want."

Such a bold statement shocked Maryl and she felt her hackles go up. "I can't believe you would say such a thing. You would *force* me to sing for you?"

Robin grinned and bit into the apple with a crunch. "You *could* just do it and I won't have to be unpleasant. It's up to you."

Maryl was suddenly on very uncertain ground. It occurred to her that she really didn't know Robin, regardless of how intimate they had become. She had no way of knowing what Robin was capable of in order to get what she wanted. She was tempted to sing just to avoid finding out. "What are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided yet." Robin stared at her apple, looking for her next bite. "This apple is really good. Very sweet."

Maryl sat with her lunch in one hand and a beer in the other. She wasn't sure what to do. Sing and endure Robin's ridicule or refuse and suffer the consequences. Robin seemed totally calm and Maryl found that even more distressing than threats.

Robin finished her apple and tossed the core in the river. "Thank you for lunch."

"There's more." Maryl swallowed nervously.

"Maybe later." Robin swung around behind Maryl and put her arms around her waist. "Eat. I want to make love to you."

Maryl forced herself to finish her sandwich while Robin nuzzled her neck and ear. It was hard to stay scared when Robin's lips raised such delicious sensations. She felt herself weakening and after a final mouthful of beer, she turned in Robin's arms and pulled her mouth down for a kiss. Robin was more knowledgeable about her body this time and she deliberately brought Maryl to the edge of orgasm and held her there.

"Does this feel good?"

Maryl was all but crying for release. "Yes!"

"Do you want to come?"

"Yes!"

"Will you sing for me?"

Maryl hesitated and Robin's caress stilled. She groaned. "Not fair. Please."

"Promise me," Robin said.

She felt Robin's fingers move in a reminder and then stop again. She was too close to endure much more, but she couldn't let herself surrender to such blatant manipulation. "No."

Robin's laughter accompanied renewed stroking and Maryl came in a blaze of light and sound. She heard herself cry out and was shocked at herself. At the same time, however, allowing her passion voice at the height was remarkably satisfying both physically and emotionally. "That was mean," she gasped.

Robin lowered her to the ground and lay on her. "It would have been mean if I had held out for your promise, but I wanted you to come. You weren't quiet that time," she said proudly. "I'll bet they heard you in camp."

"Whose camp?" Maryl giggled.

"Both." Robin kissed her way from ear to neck and stopped at a point just below her jaw. "This is where I'm going to put it."

"Put what?"

"A monster hickey."

"No hickeys," Maryl said quickly. "They'll see it."

"A big old fat hickey right there. Unless you sing for me."

"You wouldn't," Maryl laughed.

Robin's voice was quiet and sure. "I promise you that I will. You have ten seconds to decide."

Maryl sputtered and objected as Robin counted down. She tried to get away, but Robin had her pinned and she couldn't fight back. "Wait!" she screamed out as Robin's mouth found its mark. "Wait."

"Yes or no?" Robin grinned.

Maryl wasn't really angry, but it was the next closest thing. "I am so going to get you back for this."

"Is that a yes?"

Maryl nodded.

"You have to say it," Robin pressed.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

Maryl wiggled and still couldn't escape. "Yes, I will sing for you." Robin kissed her mouth quickly and backed off. Maryl sat up and glared at her. "I ought to give *you* a hickey."

Robin held her arms wide. "Go ahead. Not only do I deserve it, my family will get a kick out of it."

Maryl ended up singing Happy Birthday after drinking a second beer for courage. Robin's face beamed with excitement as her small voice mangled the brief tune.

"That wasn't *nearly* as bad as I expected," Robin said as she hugged her. Maryl mumbled into her shoulder. "I feel like an idiot."

Robin laughed. "You're adorable, Maryl, but you have to sing with enthusiasm or it just won't work."

"You heard how bad I was."

Robin kissed her face. "You can't miss the cobbler. The berries around here are wonderful. Now, what are you going to sing?"

Maryl hedged and whined, but Robin was so loving, attentive and relentless that she gave in and began to enjoy herself. Robin taught her a song that made her laugh and they sang it over and over until Maryl had it down pat.

"One more time," Robin urged, "and then I'll leave you alone."

Maryl took a deep breath and sang. "*Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I'm gonna go eat worms. Big fat short ones, long tall skinny ones, I love the way they squirm...*" She sang it straight through at full voice, laughing as Robin picked her up in a bear hug and swung her around.

"That was perfect! Sing it just like that and you'll knock their socks off!"

Maryl hid her face. "I can't believe I'm going to sing for cobbler."

"Not for cobbler," Robin laughed. "To prove that they can't scare you off or bully you."

"You did."

"That was different."

"How?"

Robin shrugged. "Because you secretly wanted me to force you."

Play erupted and Maryl chased Robin through the river and around trees, shrieking and laughing until she managed to pin her against a rock and kiss her. The dreamy feel to the day increased and they made love and talked and made love again.

Maryl looked with regret at the sun's position and knew it was time to go. She snuggled deeper into Robin's body. "I don't ever want to leave. I want to stay here forever."

"I can build a fire," Robin offered. "We could sleep here. You never did try out the air mattress."

"I wish I could."

"Let's do it," Robin begged.

"They're going to start looking for me soon. If I don't come back and they can't find me, they'll call Search and Rescue." She closed her eyes as Robin kissed her forehead.

"Can you come back tomorrow?"

"I think I accidentally agreed to stay in camp tomorrow. I could have kicked myself, but I couldn't think of a way out of it without hurting Wendy's feelings." She could see Robin's disappointment. "Maybe I could get away for a little while in the afternoon, but I can't promise. I resent feeling obligated to spending time with them. I like some of them all right, but they're not my friends. They're just people I know."

"It's okay, Maryl. I'll be here at one tomorrow and I'll stay for a couple of hours. If you can't come I'll understand that it's not because you don't want to be here."

Maryl leaned on an elbow so she could see Robin's face better. "The next day is my last full day here, you know. I don't care what happens at camp. I want to spend every minute of it with you."

Robin smiled. "Then I can live with not seeing you tomorrow if that's what happens."

Maryl kissed her for being so understanding and being so flexible about it. Working together they cleaned up the beach and packed their things. They shared a last fiery kiss that threatened to make them late, then turned and went their separate ways.

Part Two

It had been such an incredible, amazing, passionate, unforgettable, wild and utterly enjoyable day that Robin couldn't even feel bad about not seeing Maryl the next day. She grinned and laughed and sang to herself as she walked, almost forgetting to stop and put her clothes back on before arriving at camp.

Her oldest nephew, Jonny, was the first person she saw and she waved to him as he ran to join her.

"Aunt Robin! Aunt Robin! I caught a fish!"

"No way!"

"Uh huh!" He puffed his chest out proudly as they walked. "Daddy said we could eat it. Do you want some?"

"Absolutely!" Robin suspected it was not going to be a pleasant experience and she resolved to do something rotten to Eric in return. "Congratulations!"

"Can I pull your tube?"

Robin handed over the rope and he proudly marched in front of her, the tube dragging him more than he was pulling it. When they reached the trail up to camp, Robin hefted the cooler in her arms. Jonny flipped the tube up and used the inner netting to balance it on his head.

"Daddy says you had a date."

"Something like that."

"What did you do?"

Robin smiled. "Oh, we rode in a limousine and went to dinner, then we went to a movie and did some dancing."

Johnny was quiet for a moment. "There's no limousines or movies in camping."

"There's no fooling you, is there?"

"You always tease us and make up stories," he complained.

"And you always figure it out," she said fondly. "I like that you're so smart."

Jonny beamed through the netting at her.

"There you are, dear."

Robin looked up and into her mother's eyes. "Am I too late for dinner?"

Her mother's eyes searched her face as Jonny marched on past and apparently she liked what she saw. She put her arm around Robin's shoulders. "It's good to see you happy again. It breaks my heart to see you miserable."

Robin leaned past the cooler and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mom."

"Of course you do," her mother said briskly. "I raised my kids up right."

Robin laughed and headed for the cooking area.

"Look out for Bruce," her mother warned. "He seems to think..."

"There you are!" Bruce's tenor rang out. "You *dog!*"

Robin set her burden down and Bruce lifted her into the air. "Put me down, you ape!" She twisted his ears and laughed, but he bounced her in his arms.

"I know what you've been doing," he hissed at her.

"You *think* you know," she corrected.

"You've been getting lucky almost constantly since about 2 hours after you left."

He looked pleased with himself and Robin colored sharply. "You're guessing!"

Bruce lowered her to the ground and hugged her. "I'm not guessing, Sis. She makes you happy."

"This isn't fair. How come you got all the psychic ability?"

"You got the good looks and the brains. I'm happy for you. I hope it works out."

Robin hugged him back. "You're the best, Bruce."

"About time you figured that out." He released her and punched her in the arm, then turned to the

others and held his hand out. "Pay up, guys."

"*You took bets?*" Robin asked in embarrassed horror.

"Man's got to make a living."

Robin opened her little cooler and tossed out all the cans and bottles. She picked it up, half ice and half water, dumped it over him as he collected and then ran like hell. She didn't get far and she put up a good fight, but it wasn't until the wives took pity on her that Bruce was driven off. She wandered back to the campfire with them, picking burrs out of her hair.

"What's her name?" Julian's wife, Clarisa, asked.

"Maryl. She's blond; a little shorter, a little younger and gorgeous. You'd like her. She's got a great sense of humor."

"Do we get to meet her?"

"Probably not," Robin admitted with regret. "We haven't talked about the future at all."

Bruce's wife, Phoebe, took her hand. "So, did you really...?"

Robin felt her face growing hot again. "Most of the day. It bugs me that he always knows about me and I never know about him."

Phoebe laughed. "Doesn't bother me at all. But I have to tell you, it sure makes him randy."

Robin covered her face with both hands and a groan. "I don't want to know things like that, Phebes." The wives laughed at her discomfiture and Robin dropped onto a log by the fire.

Jonny's fish turned out to be some sort of bottom feeder and there was just enough of it that everyone had to choke down a bite. Jonny was puffed up like an old bullfrog with pride and that just barely made it worth it. To keep her sex life out of the conversation, Robin sat next to Uncle Gus and listened to his hunting and fishing stories. If you relaxed with a beer in your hand, he was actually kind of fun to talk to and it made her feel closer to her dad because he figured prominently in most of Uncle Gus' tales.

Eventually, her family drifted off to bed and Robin pulled a lounge chair over by the fire. She watched the stars and wondered if Maryl was doing the same.

"Make some room for your mother."

Robin pulled her knees up and her mother sat down at the foot. At her mother's urging she placed her legs on her lap.

"I'm happy for you, honey, but I'm worried for you, too."

"I know," Robin said quietly. "I'm not worried exactly, but I know I'm not thinking clearly."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes and no. I barely know her, but I think I *could* love her."

"What happens at the end of this trip?"

"We are deliberately not talking about it. She lives over in Edgewater and she's happy there."

"Will you try to have a long distance relationship?"

"I hope so. I hate to think it could just be over." Their voices were soft and private.

"If it doesn't work out, what happens to your heart?"

Robin heard her mother's real question. "Will I go back to how I was? I hope not. I think a part of me knows that it will probably end when she goes home, but the part of me that was broken seems to be healing. I don't know what happened between Tammy and I; I probably never will, but it's in the past now. It wasn't before I met Maryl."

"What's she like?"

Robin's heart grew tender. "She's very pretty and she's clever. I think she's smart, too, but clever describes her better. She's really feisty, Mom, and she laughs at herself. I know she's recovering from a relationship, too, but I don't know anything about it. She works the front desk in a medical office. Her family lives in South Carolina and her dad calls her 'The Brat'."

Her mother laughed. "You know that we would all love to meet her."

"I think she'd fit right in, but I don't know if that's possible."

"Are you going to see her tomorrow?"

"She wasn't sure if she could get away. I'm going to wait for her for a bit in the afternoon, but I kind of think she won't make it." Robin brightened. "She promised me the next day though. That'll be the last time."

Robin's mother seemed to struggle for words. "I promised myself I wouldn't say it, but I can't help it. *Be careful.*"

Robin sighed. "I think it's too late for that, Mom. But I promise not to sink into a huge depression over it. Okay?"

"I love my boys, Robin, but there's a special place in my heart that belongs only to you. There

always will be."

Robin sat up and hugged her mother before she dragged herself off to bed.

~***~

She packed light for her next trip up river. She felt obligated to go, but she knew that Maryl wouldn't be there. It was a measure of that certainty that she didn't bother to take her clothes off before reaching the small beach. Arriving naked had become somewhat of a ritual and today it just wasn't necessary. It was still a pleasure to be alone in the place where they had made love. Robin imagined she could still hear Maryl's orgasmic cries echoing from the hills and the sound of her singing in the air.

She laughed at the memory. She really did have a hideous singing voice. The timbre was good, but it bore no resemblance to any known musical tones. Hearing her sing had been the most endearing thing about Maryl and she almost felt bad about encouraging her to sing to her camping buddies.

Robin sat in the sand and drank from a bottle of water while she remembered. She thought she heard her name and looked excitedly upstream, but Maryl wasn't there. She relaxed and heard it again. She stood up and searched, but there was still no sign of her. The sound came again and she turned to see Trevor downstream, waving his arms over his head.

"What?" She yelled back.

"...camp!"

Robin took a few uncertain steps, instantly consumed by worry. "What?"

"She...camp!"

Robin still didn't understand, but he seemed excited rather than worried, so she jogged towards him. As she closed the distance, she called out. "What's going on?"

"Your girlfriend! She's at our camp!"

Robin almost tripped in surprise. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah."

She slowed to a walk as she got close enough to see that he was winded. "What happened?"

"She walked up to Bruce like she knew him and asked him to invite her to stay. She was with some other women, but she didn't want them to know that we knew who she was. Mom was making a plan when Eric sent me for you."

Robin couldn't believe what she was hearing. "She's at our camp? Right now?"

"If I know Mom she is," he grinned. "Give me your pack. You can run faster without it." Robin shrugged out of her pack and handed it to him. "I ran all the way here," he explained. "I'm going to walk back."

Robin turned to go. "Thanks, Trey."

"Hey, Rob!" He said as she began to move away. "She's really built. Way to go."

Robin grinned in embarrassed pride. "Shut up, you pig." She broke into an easy lope and the terrain was no hindrance. She picked up her pace and began to hurdle rocks and cut around trees as if she was born to do it. Her lungs seemed to expand and she was in tune with her body in a way that included everything around her. She lost track of the mechanics of what she was doing and ran with full enjoyment and anticipation.

Before she knew it, she was running up the trail and into camp. Maryl was sitting at the picnic table with most of her family in attendance and Robin came to an abrupt halt. "Are you okay?"

"Of course she is," her mother snorted.

Maryl stood up and came to her. "I hope this was okay?"

Robin couldn't help it. She put her arms around her and hugged her tight.

"I had to see you and it was all I could think of," Maryl whispered in her ear.

Robin could feel her family watching and it made her uncomfortable. She took Maryl's hand. "We have to talk for a minute," she told them. She ignored their ribbing and led Maryl to a spot that overlooked the river. "It's completely okay that you're here. I just don't understand."

Maryl sighed. "My group banded together this morning and announced that I shouldn't be running off all the time. They had all sorts of lame reasons. They were worried: it was disruptive: it wasn't healthy for me to be alone: lions and tigers and bears, oh my!"

Robin grinned at the reference.

"It was like a damned intervention. I knew if I told them about you they would still object and if I had a fit and took off, they would come after me. I tried to kick back and let the day go, but the closer it got to noon, the more it hurt not to be able to see you and I felt bad that you would be stuck there waiting while I was trapped in camp."

"I didn't mind."

"I did!" Maryl's hands randomly plucked at Robin's shirt and ran over her shoulders. "So I thought about it and I hoped that if I could arrange an invitation to be with other people, they

would have to let me stay or they'd look controlling. I wanted to get here before you left, but..."

Robin leaned in and kissed her. "How did you get here?"

"I offered to buy them all hot showers."

Robin laughed at her ingenuity.

"If you pay the day use fee you get access to the showers," Maryl explained. "They thought it was a peace offering. While they were showering, I found your camp-you all really do look alike, you know-and I just walked up to the closest one and introduced myself."

"Bruce."

"He's handsome," Maryl teased, "but you're definitely the pretty one."

Robin hugged her again. "Not as pretty as you. So how did it all get worked out?"

"Bruce told me he would handle it. I went back and took a shower and when we were getting into the van, your mother and three of your brothers walked up. Your mom is a hoot. She invited us all to spend the day and have dinner. She suggested that one of us might find one of her sons interesting."

Robin laughed. "I imagine that didn't go over well."

"Like lead feathers. I asked your mom if *she* was available and..."

Robin held onto Maryl's shoulder while she doubled over in laughter.

"...She took my arm and said that she might be. I thought Linda was going to start frothing at the mouth, but Bruce promised to keep me safe and see that I got back to camp later. I expect it will be really horrible when I go back, but I don't care. It'll just give me a good reason to split tomorrow."

"Oh, God," Robin laughed. "I wish I'd seen it."

"If they had seen you, they would have known by my face. Did you run all the way back?"

"Yeah."

"For me?"

Robin pulled her in for another kiss. Mindful that there were people near, she kept it light. "You look good in clothes."

"So do you. But I wish..."

"We'll find some time later. I promise."

They walked back to camp hand in hand and Maryl was surrounded. She seemed comfortable so Robin let her go. It made her jealous to have to share her, so she walked over and sat down next to her mother to help shuck the corn for dinner. "Tell the truth, Mom. Were you tempted?"

Her mother laughed and slapped her arm. "You were right. She is feisty and clever."

"Did she really ask if you were available?"

"She sure did. Her companions were none too happy, I can tell you that. We invited the lot of them, but if it didn't make them mad it seemed to scare them. They took her aside and really lit into her, but she stuck to her guns. I hope she doesn't run into trouble with them."

Robin did, too. "I think they're just being protective. It's kind of a support group and maybe they feel threatened that she doesn't need as much support as they think she should have."

"Well, do-gooders tend to do the most damage. Your father always said that. They're so convinced they're right and they know what's best that they can't see the harm they do."

Robin remembered her father saying that exact thing. He had been a proud, opinionated man who believed that *real* Americans thought for themselves and left each other alone. "I miss Dad. I don't know how you manage."

"I just do, honey. I miss him terrible now and then, but I expect I'll see him again someday."

"If you behave yourself," Robin teased.

"For pity's sake, girl! I can't believe you talk to your old mother that way. And after all I've done for you. I was in labor for twenty-two hours to bring you into this world."

"You labored over *Bruce* for twenty-two hours," she corrected playfully. "I only took 9 minutes."

"Nine minutes over my knee will fix that smart mouth of yours."

Robin loved it when her mother teased like that. It made her want to giggle. She watched Maryl talking and laughing at the table as if she had known them all for years. "Thanks for helping her, Mom."

"Anything to make my baby girl happy."

Robin felt incredibly loved in that moment and wasn't sure how to express it. Trevor came up the path and she excused herself to go and get her pack from him. "Thank you, Trey. I really appreciate it."

"No problem." He reached into a cooler for beer and nodded at Maryl. "She seems to be fitting in just fine."

"You guys make it easy." Love bubbled up and she had to let it out. "You know, I never say it, but you guys are the best family a lesbian could have. It's never an issue with any of you that I fall in love with women. All I ever have to worry about is whether or not you'll like her and you guys had to worry about the same thing. I'm so lucky and I love you all so much."

Trevor squinted at her as if confused. "I think you've been spending too much time in the sun."

Robin shook her head and began to laugh as he walked away. Cards were being pulled out at the table and she went to join them.

~***~

All of the children and Uncle Gus were in bed and Robin had Maryl in her arms on a lounge chair. Her face was on a level with Maryl's neck and she lay in perfect contentment, breathing in the scent of her and listening as her family divulged all of her childhood secrets.

"...The way I heard it," Maryl laughed, "was that you *threw* her off."

"The whole thing was just a misunderstanding," Eric insisted. "I was only nine years old and I didn't understand physics."

"Or aerodynamics," Julian put in. "I still can't believe I got in trouble for that. It was your idea."

"You were the one who suggested that if we were going to do it right we should use the best sheets in the house."

Robin's mother rubbed at her face. "I still can't laugh about it. That was the most awful day. Trey was a toddler and he'd gotten away from me. I knew he was in the house, but I couldn't find him. I was looking under Bruce's bed-he had chicken pox-and he suddenly screamed and started crying about his arm and then Eric and Julian came pelting down the stairs hollering about how something didn't work. I knew they were up to no good so I followed them and I swear, I thought my little girl was dead."

It always made Robin's heart hurt when her mother talked about that day. That she was so affected by it, after more than thirty years, that she still couldn't find anything funny about it made Robin feel a little sick at how she must have felt way back then.

"She was *covered* with blood and Bruce was in some kind of pain and I couldn't find the baby..."

Robin whispered into Maryl's ear. "Look at Eric and Julian." They were both pale and guilt-ridden and Maryl nodded. "They're still paying for it."

"Hey," Trevor said. "Do you remember the frogs in the creek?"

Everybody laughed as if on cue and even her mother started to smile. "I thought it was very clever." She turned to face Maryl to explain. "When she was about 14, she started running around the neighborhood doing odd jobs, but she never had any money. We couldn't figure out what she was doing with it. It was only by accident that her father saw her in a pet store one day and got curious."

"She was buying frogs?" Maryl asked.

Bruce laughed and shook his head. "She was buying snakes."

Robin spoke just loudly enough to be heard by all. "The frogs were making so much racket I couldn't sleep. I had to do something." Maryl began to chuckle and Robin could feel the vibrations in her chest.

"She was turning snakes loose in the creek to eat the frogs," her mother said proudly. "By the end of summer it was pretty quiet."

"People still find wild pythons now and then," Trevor said. "I've seen a few myself."

"What about the time she stole Mr. Bertoldi's dog and gave her a haircut?" Julian noted.

"He wasn't taking care of her," Robin objected.

Eric piped in. "Remember the time she swiped Betsy's dad's Playboys and hid them under our mattresses only to rat us out to Mom?"

"Or when she busted Allen McIntyre's nose?" Bruce added.

"What about the time she made us cookies with chocolate Exlax instead of chocolate chips?"

"Or when she put Easter egg dye in the whipped cream and it turned our mouths green?"

"She cancelled all of my utilities on the second day in my first apartment," Trevor laughed.

"She voted for me as a write in on the cheerleader squad," Bruce grimaced.

"I remember coming home from our honeymoon," Phoebe said, "to find our house completely over run with little white mice."

"She glued my drawers shut. Twice!"

"Lies," Robin whispered to Maryl. "All lies. Don't pay any attention to them. They've been drinking."

Maryl leaned back into her and turned her face up. "So none of it is true?"

Robin hesitated for effect. "It was self-defense."

"Was it now?" Maryl laughed.

"They aren't telling all the stuff they did to me! Trey took my *lesbian* underwear to school for show and tell. Bruce told everyone I was a transsexual and took up donations for my operation. Julian sewed all of my pant legs shut and Eric used to put my hands in warm water while I slept to make me wet the bed. They were *mean* to me."

Everyone, including Maryl, was howling with laughter and Robin snorted in feigned disgust. She rose up on an elbow and surveyed them. "You all deserved it. Every bit."

Maryl rolled back and slipped her arm around Robin's waist. "Do you want me to believe that you were sweet and innocent?"

"Yeah."

"That you were tormented and persecuted by these ruffians?"

"I was!"

"Okay," Maryl smiled. "I'll try."

"At least someone believes me." There was some easy-going teasing, but Robin was only aware that her breast was touching Maryl's. "Do you want to go for a drive?" she asked softly.

Maryl smiled and sat up. "I should get back to camp. It's awfully late."

Robin's mother stood up and pulled Maryl into a hug. "It was wonderful to meet you, dear. Feel free to come back anytime and if those friends of yours turn out to be more than you can handle, we'll see that you get home."

"Thank you. By the way, where was Trevor that day?"

"In his crib napping. Exactly where I left him."

Robin kicked Bruce in the leg while Maryl was laughing and demanded his truck keys. "Not a word," she warned.

"It doesn't take a psychic to know what you two will be doing," he laughed.

"You're a worm, Bruce."

"And you're a tom cat on the prowl."

Robin ignored the catcalls from the campfire and guided Maryl to the truck.

"I like your family a lot," Maryl said over the starting of the engine. "They seem like really great people."

"I like to think so."

"You're close to them."

Robin glanced at Maryl as she drove slowly out of the campground and headed slowly up the hill. "We're closer now than we were as children. That was one of the best things about growing up: getting to know each other as adults and finding out that we liked one another. I only wish my dad were still here. You would have liked him."

Maryl was watching intently out the front window, relentlessly curling a strand of hair around her finger.

"Are you worried about your group?" Robin asked with some concern.

Maryl shook her head slowly. "Not really. There's a turnout on your side coming up pretty quick. Pull into it."

Robin spotted it a few minutes later and guided the truck off the road. She set the parking brake and turned off the lights and engine. It was very dark and Maryl was just a shadow. The ticking of the motor was almost the only sound. Robin whispered, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Maryl said in an equally soft tone. "Just listening to you breathe. I can smell you-like rain and fresh mown grass. My heart is beating like a brass band on the Fourth of July."

"Mine, too. I don't remember ever *aching* to touch someone before. It's got to be the nicest pain there is."

Maryl's voice was soft and low. "Come over here."

Robin turned her back to Maryl and slid towards her over the bench seat. Arms came around her and she lay back into them with complete trust. She slid one arm around Maryl's waist and the other around her neck as Maryl began to kiss her slowly. She seemed different in the dark and Robin let her set the pace. Their lips and tongues slid over and around and into each other in the most delightful fashion and it made Robin dizzy. She was aware when Maryl's hand slid inside her shirt to cup a breast and Robin ached at her touch.

Maryl ran her hand over her breasts, content to feel them inside the cotton bra. She eventually reached around her and deftly unhooked it. "I want you naked," Maryl whispered into her mouth.

Robin nodded breathlessly as Maryl's fingers moved to her shorts. Willing to do anything she asked, it seemed only a moment and Robin was nude and kneeling astride Maryl's legs. They kissed deeply as Maryl's hands explored her in the dark-as interested in the structure of her back

as in the texture of her inner thigh.

"Maryl," Robin gasped as her passion thickened. "Do you know what you do to me?"

"Yes," Maryl said huskily. "I make you crazy. I make you hot." Her lips closed briefly on a throbbing nipple. "I make you *need* it."

"Please, Maryl..."

"Not yet..."

Robin *did* need it. She tried to get hands under Maryl's clothing and was diverted. She tried to rub her groin on Maryl's leg or hip and was held back. She tried to push Maryl's hands between her legs and didn't have the strength. She didn't think it was possible to be this aroused without coming, but Maryl was determined to take her time and Robin could hear herself whimpering. "*Please, Maryl. Please, now!*"

Maryl's mouth moved from breast to breast, licking and biting and sucking until Robin gradually stiffened at the unbearable pleasure she felt. It became too much and she shuddered through what felt like an orgasm, but took away none of the passion she felt.

"So beautiful," Maryl groaned.

Robin was frantic now and her teeth chattered helplessly as Maryl's hand slid between her legs. Fingers entered her and Robin dropped her head to Maryl's shoulder and began to rock on the heel of her hand. In only a few blissful moments, she began to come in slow, inexorable waves and she chased each and every one to its end.

"Oh, Maryl. Sweet Maryl." She wrapped her arms around Maryl's shoulders as she was rocked to and fro. "I don't even know if I can describe it."

"Sh. Don't talk, Robin. Just let me hold you."

Robin buried a hand in soft hair and relaxed. She was perfectly content to stay in Maryl's arms till daybreak. Her skin had ceased to exist where Maryl wasn't touching it and when the rocking came to an end Maryl sighed.

"Time to go, Robin."

"What about you?"

"Feeling you come like that was all I needed and we still have tomorrow."

~***~

Maryl stood in the dark and listened to the sound of the truck as it got further and further away.

Knowing they would be together in the morning left her feeling peaceful and content. When the sounds of the night and distant voices were all she could hear, Maryl carefully walked through the night towards the flickering campfire. The entire group was sitting around the fire and their voices stilled as she approached.

"You guys should have stayed," she said brightly in hopes that it would diffuse any hostility. "They were really sweet people."

"I guess that means we aren't," Brooke grumbled.

"I'm just saying that you would have had a good time."

"I think something is going on," Linda said suspiciously. "You disappear every day-*all day*-and you just happen to get invited to spend the day with total strangers?"

"They invited all of us," Maryl said firmly. "You are the ones who didn't want to make new friends."

Kirsten eyed her carefully. "I agree with Linda. I think you met someone on the river and you don't want us to know. I can still tell when a woman is falling in love."

Maryl ignored the oddness of that statement and put her hands on her hips. "Is that what all of you think?"

Wendy ducked her head, but the others stared at her with a variety of emotions. Eva cleared her throat. "We think you arranged the...scenario...at the showers today. The truth is, if you *have* met someone, it's not really our business. But we are worried about you and we feel we have a right to express concern over your actions. We only have each other to count on up here and you are isolating yourself more and more from our support."

"We feel obligated to watch out for your safety," Noreen said gently. "If anything bad happens to you, we are the ones who will have to deal with it."

"When we accepted that responsibility," Eva said, "you accepted some responsibility, too."

Maryl knew there was truth in what they said. Something in her gut told her there was a flaw in their argument, but she couldn't find it. She opened her mouth to tell them about Robin, but Linda cut in angrily.

"We have a *right* to know where you're going and who you're with. You *owe* us that."

Linda's attitude pushed all the wrong buttons and her temper flared. "I have been very clear about where I've been. If you don't want to make friends, that's your business. I do. That's my business. The first time I went off alone, I invited every single one of you to go with me and no one wanted to. That's fine with me. But don't start whining now because you didn't go. If what you want is for me to hang around and wallow in pain with you-well, I'm sorry. I just can't do that."

Not all day, every day."

"Not ever," Brooke accused.

"I resent your accusation that what we do is wallow in pain," Linda growled.

"I'm *so* sorry," Maryl snapped. She could feel her anger spiraling out of control and she desperately wanted to hold it back, but she couldn't stop. "Please forgive me for speaking so carelessly. I just have a hard time being nice when other people try to run *my* life. Especially when they aren't doing such a great job of running their own."

"That's not fair," Noreen objected.

"Neither is ganging up on me! I had a good time tonight, which none of you wanted to be a part of, and now I'm getting grief for it! You ganged up on me first thing this morning and now you're doing it again! How is *that* fair?" Maryl jerked backwards as Eva stood up and attempted to take her arm.

"Hey, let's calm down," Eva said anxiously. "There's no need for all of us to get upset. All we want is to make sure that you're safe."

"By letting this group dictate to me?"

"Not necessarily. Come on, Maryl. Come sit down and we'll work this out."

Maryl let herself be guided to the remaining lawn chair. She kept her back teeth firmly together in an effort to control her tongue, but she wanted to kick the fire around and scream.

Eva sat down and looked everyone over. "Let's not lose sight of the fact that Maryl is a grown woman and has proven that she is perfectly capable of taking care of herself. Our purpose is only to make sure she doesn't come to harm over the next day and a half." She turned her eyes on Maryl. "Now. None of us are stupid. You've met someone. We need your reassurance that you are safe with her."

Maryl bit her tongue hard to keep anger from turning to tears. "I am."

"*I knew it!*" Linda crowed.

"That's enough, Linda!" Eva was angry. "You're making it harder for her to trust us and I won't have it. Whether she knows it or not, she needs us and you're *deliberately* antagonizing her. If you can't show some respect and understanding, go sit in the van till we're done."

Linda tried not to look defeated, but Maryl could see it. That Eva was willing to set Linda down told her that Eva's concern was genuine and she felt bad about getting angry.

"Okay," Eva said. "You've met someone. We can all see that you have feelings for her."

Congratulations."

Maryl looked down at Wendy's hand on her arm and the first tear escaped.

"Does she make you happy?" Wendy asked in her soft voice.

Maryl's tears flowed instantly and she couldn't hold back a sob of longing. "Yes," she whispered. She put her head back and began breathing through her mouth to make herself stop crying.

"Did you meet her at the campground?" Noreen asked.

"No. On the river. By accident."

"But she was there today."

Maryl nodded as she got herself under control and wiped her tears away.

Kirsten leaned forward. "What about your feelings for Alaine? Pain doesn't just go away."

"Maybe not," Maryl agreed. "But after a while it becomes background noise and you can stop listening to it. Granted, what Alaine did hurt me, but I don't want her back. I stopped wanting her when I found her in my bed with those men. The hope that she was the one for me is fading slowly, but the wanting died in an instant."

"Why did you join our group?" Brooke asked.

Maryl thought it over. "I guess I wanted...permission to stop hurting."

"Good answer," Noreen blurted out. She barked a laugh, paused and started laughing again. "Permission to stop hurting. I like that." She shook her head and chuckled softly to herself.

"Does this new woman give you that permission?" Eva asked.

"Yes." Maryl reconsidered. "No. Being with her allows me to give myself permission."

Brooke frowned. "I think you're in denial."

Maryl sighed impatiently. "At what point does it stop being denial and become getting on with my life? It's been almost 4 months since I kicked Alaine out. Do I have to wait a certain amount of time? How much? Six months? A year? Three years? When do I get to say it's over and move on?"

Brooke spread her hands out. "I just don't think you've dealt with it yet. Not really."

Maryl felt exasperated with Brooke. "Why?"

"Well, you hardly ever talk about it and you *never* cry..."

"I cried plenty," Maryl admitted. "I just don't cry about it in front of you. I didn't realize it was a requirement."

"I'm just saying..."

"Everyone handles it differently," Eva interrupted. "It's not right to judge the depth of someone else's pain by your own standards. Some people cry, some get angry, some never get over it and some seem unaffected. Personally, I think Maryl is over the worst of her issues with Alaine. Time will handle the rest."

Maryl was grateful for the support.

"What does concern me," Eva said directly to Maryl, "is that you don't create new pain to replace the old. I'm concerned about this new relationship. What do you really know about her? How does she feel about you? What happens at the end of our trip? And how will your heart handle it if it's over?"

"She's a good person," Maryl said quickly. "I know enough about her to make that judgement. And I think she has feelings for me, too. But...I think it's a spur of the moment affair for both of us. I expect we'll go our separate ways."

"How do you feel about that?"

Maryl brought her urge to cry under control before she answered. "I think it's the way it has to be, but that doesn't have to ruin our time together."

Linda finally spoke. "Are you going to see her tomorrow?"

Maryl lifted her chin defiantly. "Yes. I am. I'm leaving as soon as I wake up and I don't know when I'll be back. I promise to be here before we break camp the next day. I would appreciate it if no one came looking for me unless there's an emergency."

Linda snorted her displeasure. At Eva's glare she got up and stomped off to bed. "How far down river will you be?"

"It's a 45 minute walk or so. We're right on the water, out in the open. I won't be hard to find."

"And you trust her to keep you safe? She knows what she's doing?"

"Yes," Maryl said confidently. She thought of Bruce's link to Robin. "She stays in touch with one of her brothers constantly. If anything happens he'll know immediately and they can run there in 15 minutes or so."

Eva smiled. "That's all I care about, Maryl. I just want to know that you're safe. Just keep it all in

perspective. If you need to talk about it, you know we're here for you."

Maryl nodded and Eva took one of the lanterns with her to the tent. Kirsten followed her and a moment later Brook did, too. She could see the outlines of the four women on the tent's walls; the murmur of their voices indistinct.

"So," Noreen said with affected casualness. "Is she any good?"

Maryl blushed head to toe. "*Amazing.*" Wendy sweet laughter danced through the air like butterflies on Ecstasy. The sound was contagious and she and Noreen had to join in.

~***~

Robin had packed everything she thought they might need or want for the next day in the largest pack she could find as soon as she got back to camp. She left it next to the inner tube and cooler by the river and went to bed. She dozed fitfully, afraid she would oversleep and just before 3 in the morning, she gave up.

Moving quietly, she dressed, grabbed a flashlight and picked up her gear. In the dark, her 15-minute run of the previous afternoon took more than an hour and a half of careful navigation through the water. By the time she reached their beach, her legs were numb from the knee down and her teeth were chattering. She knew it was foolish to put herself in such straits, but she didn't care.

She wasn't surprised that Maryl wasn't there yet. She didn't expect her for hours and with almost two hours till dawn, her first order of business was building a fire. She curled up next to it wrapped in a blanket and allowed her body to warm up before turning the beach into a campsite. She had the coffee almost ready when she spotted a flashlight bobbing towards her in the pre-dawn darkness. She stood opposite of the fire so Maryl could see her and tried to contain her joy. Maryl dropped her pack and jacket to the ground and Robin held open the blanket that was draped over her shoulders to welcome her into her arms.

"You're so warm," Maryl said with a contented sigh. "And you've got a fire and coffee going. How long have you been here?"

"A little over an hour. I couldn't sleep."

"I didn't think you'd be here yet."

"Can I make you breakfast?"

Maryl chuckled. "How much stuff did you bring?"

"Everything I could think of," Robin admitted. "At least, everything I could get here in one trip."

Maryl looked around and back to Robin's face. "Through the water? In the dark?"

"I know it was stupid," Robin said. "I couldn't help it." She smiled as Maryl snuggled closer and held her tightly. "I won't do it again."

"Do you sit around thinking up ways to impress me?"

Robin laughed. "If I'd been thinking I wouldn't have lost the feeling in my feet." Maryl looked at her with concern. "I'm fine. What did you bring?"

"Food, mostly. Is there room in your cooler?"

"We'll make room."

They both laughed at how much food they had when combined. "Maybe we should send out invitations for company," Maryl suggested.

"Sorry," Robin said. "'I don't want to share you today."

Maryl sat between Robin's legs, the blanket around them both as they drank coffee and watched the sun come up.

"Did they give you a hard time last night?" Robin wondered.

"Some. But we worked it out."

Robin brushed blond hair to the side and pressed her lips to the soft skin of her neck. "When do you have to go back?"

"Before they start breaking camp tomorrow morning."

Robin almost cried with gratitude for a full 24 hours with Maryl. She rested her cheek against Maryl's shoulder and her heart filled with love. She knew she loved Maryl. She had known during her run to camp the previous day, when her body and the universe had become one and the only thing that existed was her need to see her. She wanted to say the words out loud, but she somehow felt that Maryl wasn't ready to hear them and she didn't want to jeopardize this last day together. Somehow, sometime, before Maryl had to leave, she *would* say the words. She *needed* to say them.

"What are you thinking about?"

Robin drew her awareness back into her body. "How lucky I am to be here with you." She smiled as Maryl wiggled closer into her arms.

"What did you bring for breakfast?"

"Cold cereal with banana. Do you want some?"

"Sure."

Robin quickly put it together and brought the bowl back to her.

"Aren't you going to have some?" Maryl asked.

"I only brought one bowl and one spoon." At Maryl's look of confusion, Robin explained. "I want to be as close as possible to you. I want to share everything with you." Maryl's hand came to her cheek and Robin placed a kiss in it. "Is that weird?"

"Yes," Maryl grinned. "But it's a sweet kind of weird."

Robin let Maryl control the spoon and ate when it was given to her. She made a second bowl using the last of the cereal and returned the favor. They let the fire die with the last of the morning chill and began to undress each other wordlessly. They lay together on the blanket, passion present but quiet and slowly learned each other all over again: feeling the curve of waist into hip; the tenderness of the back of a knee; the flexibility of fingers; the arch of a foot; the texture of throat; the shape of ears. They listened to each other's heartbeats and took each other's pulse.

Maryl was lying face down, arms stretched over her head and Robin watched her hand as it softly stroked in a lazy rhythm from shoulder to ass. She pressed her lips to a bare shoulder before laying her cheek on the spot. She let her hand start making decisions and enjoyed the feeling of Maryl's ass under her circling caresses. She listened to Maryl's breathing and heart rate change as her fingers began to randomly dip farther and farther between her legs. She almost couldn't breathe when Maryl deliberately spread her legs apart and Robin took full advantage. Closing her eyes, she slid two fingers inside of Maryl's moist heat and stroked in a gentle cadence.

"Robin?"

Her awareness was focused on her hand and it was difficult to frame an answer. "Hmm?"

"That feels *really* good."

"Mm hmm."

"Don't stop."

Robin nodded and completely lost track of anything outside of the sensations in her fingers. She couldn't tell when it was that Maryl first began to raise her hips to meet her. When she realized how fully involved Maryl was she moved to kneel between her open thighs and slid a third finger in as well.

Maryl rose to her hands and knees and began to writhe. Robin's own desire mounted at the

enjoyment Maryl displayed and she reached forward to caress her swinging breasts. To feel a woman-*this woman*-taking pleasure from her with such abandonment brought Robin's desire to a crescendo of emotion. She cried out in sync with Maryl, the sound of her name ringing in her ears and followed Maryl to the ground as she collapsed.

She knew how vulnerable you could feel after a particularly powerful orgasm and didn't want Maryl to feel embarrassed or alone. She spoke soothing words until she realized that Maryl wasn't listening. She was asleep. With a soft laugh, Robin withdrew her hands and sat up. "I don't think I ever put anyone to sleep before," she told the river. "I'm not sure what to do."

Wildflowers across the river caught her eye and she waded over to pick a bouquet. Tying it together with strands of her hair, she placed it where Maryl would see it, then lay down next to her and followed her into sleep.

She woke gradually, aware of the smell of sunscreen and Maryl's hands working the lotion into her legs. She hummed to let Maryl know she was awake and stretched like a cat. She felt all of her muscles relax under the thorough touch and she smiled when Maryl turned her over. The sun was not yet high so she knew they had not lost too much of the day and she watched Maryl's face as she worked. Her tiny bouquet was tucked behind one ear. "Where'd you get the flowers?"

Maryl smiled knowingly. "A woodland fairy, I suppose."

"Awfully nice of her."

"I thought so, too."

Maryl eased her leg over Robin's hips and settled down. Robin watched as she squeezed more lotion into her hands and rubbed them together. She was looking forward to those hands on her breasts, but Maryl saved them for last and then was very careful not to get any lotion on her areolas. "What if my nipples burn?" Robin asked.

"I'll kiss them better," Maryl teased.

Robin pushed her a little to one side. "You're blocking my sun."

Maryl laughed and pinned her arms. "Maybe a little preventative attention is a good idea."

Robin held her breath as Maryl slowly leaned over to kiss each one. "More," she whispered. She watched, fascinated, as Maryl's tongue circled her tightening flesh; excited to see *how* Maryl was making her feel so good. She watched her nipples disappear into her mouth one at a time and fought the desire to close her eyes and give herself up to it. "Last night...in the truck...I think I came...just from what...you're doing right now."

"I know," Maryl said between kisses. "It was very exciting...You were incredible...I could feel how much you enjoyed it...Maybe we'll try it again..."

Robin didn't think it was repeatable, but she enjoyed the attempt completely. Maryl only let her bask in the afterglow for a moment before dragging her to her feet.

"Come on, Robin. This is wonderful, but I need to move around a little. Let's go for a walk."

Dressed in sneakers and smiles, they forded the river and headed into the trees. It did feel good to walk and Robin's strength returned. "Tell me your coming out story," she prompted.

Maryl had a stick in her hand and swung it idly as they slowly strolled. "Like most people it wasn't an event so much as a process. I *came out* when I was 19, but I started messing around with girls when I was nine."

"So young?"

Maryl's voice took on a hint of fond remembrance. "A neighbor girl and I used to...play. It wasn't sexual at the time, but in retrospect it was extremely sensual. We gave each other massages and slept naked together, but there was no sexual touching or kissing. We were very casual about it, but I remember delighting in the way my body felt when she looked at me."

"Sounds innocent enough."

"It was, but it was golden, too." Maryl smiled to herself and then glanced at Robin. "Then, in seventh grade, I had every class with a girl named Debbie and we naturally became friends. We were twelve that year and we spent the night at each other's house all the time. We used to practice kissing. We slept in our underpants and we hugged a lot, but aside from kissing, we didn't touch very much. I think we knew it would be crossing a line we weren't quite ready to cross. I'm sure she wanted to as much as I did, but we were so young. In my mind, she was very much my girlfriend, but even so, I didn't really understand what that meant."

"Whatever happened to her?"

"Her family moved away. I wonder now and then if she grew up to be gay as well. She was far more aggressive than I was in what she wanted. If not for her, we wouldn't have done anything at all."

Robin recognized the far away look in Maryl's eyes and she waited for it to clear before pressing. "Then what happened?"

Maryl laughed without pleasure. "Then I hit puberty. That was such a terrible time for me. I wanted so badly to be happy and loved and I hated everything and everyone so passionately. I can hardly stand to remember how awful I felt. Of course, the root cause was that I hated myself for feeling so different and not being able to identify why. Everyone expected things from me. My family is very image oriented so I ended up being a cheerleader. I hated it. I tried so hard to be straight-I really did. I dated the boys my friends were all excited about. I even slept with some of them, but the more straight I tried to be the more unhappy I got and I couldn't even figure out why I was so miserable. I wasn't even allowed to express any of it."

Robin knew that being a teenager was hard on most people, but Maryl's teen years sounded like a nightmare. "Society, peer pressure and family are very powerful things. It's almost impossible to fight them. It's too bad we don't live in a society geared to helping us through that stage of life. How did you ever get out of it?"

Maryl smiled. "I fell in love with a girl I worked in a video store with. I was 19 and she was 20. It was scary and torrid and spine tingling all at once. Pretty typical really."

"And your family? How did they take it?"

"Badly." Maryl looked up at Robin. "'Are you sure you want to hear about this?"

"Only if you want to tell it."

Maryl sighed. "My mother drank most of a bottle of whiskey in about five minutes flat and cried till she passed out. My father called his campaign manager."

"Why?"

"He was up for re-election as a County Supervisor and he was concerned about damage control."

Robin was hesitant to be critical, but it seemed the only thing to say. "That seems rather... cold."

"It was pretty devastating at the time. Here I had finally figured out what was wrong with me and it turned out to be a wonderful thing, but my family went totally berserk. My father frowned at me for two years straight and my mother cried every time she saw me for almost 6 months. My sisters were almost as bad. My oldest sister found God and apparently he told her that I was one of Satan's imps. She still prays for me. My other sister thinks it's a phase and one of these days I'll stop embarrassing the family and come to my senses."

"You're not kidding, are you?"

Maryl shook her head. "No, I'm not. I actually toned it down quite a bit. I moved out here about 10 years ago to get away from them. I call them four times a year just to be annoying and keep my name in the will." She laughed and put her arm around Robin's waist. "What about you? What's your coming out story?"

Robin shook her head to clear it of the appalling story she had just heard. "Unlike you, my coming out was an event. You heard a part of it already, but I'll fill you in on the rest of the story. I was 13 and I was at a slumber party with a couple of girlfriends. Unbeknownst to the parents..."

"Unbeknownst?"

Robin lifted an eyebrow at Maryl's tone. "It's my story and I'll tell it how I like." She smiled at

Maryl's laugh and went on. "Okay. Like I was saying, we snuck boys into the party sometime after midnight. I didn't care one way or the other, it was just something you did back then. Bruce was one of them, by the way. We ended up playing Spin the Bottle and it was all very funny and weird. Kids kept going into the closet and we would tease them and they'd come out and be embarrassed-it was all very juvenile. Anyhow, it finally landed on me and I jumped up thinking that Susan was my partner. She *was* sitting directly across from me. I was waiting for her to stand up and the boy next to her, Allen McIntyre, stood up instead." Robin could see Maryl trying to place where she had heard that name. "He grabbed my hand and tried to drag me to the closet, but I jerked away from him. To make a long story short, I told him I didn't want to kiss him. I wanted to kiss Susan. In the instant I said it, I knew I only ever wanted to be with girls and I was perfectly fine with it. Allen called me a freak of nature and I blasted him square in the nose."

"Ah! I remember now."

"That was the only time in my life that I hit anyone in anger. It was the strangest thing."

"How so?"

"He saw it coming," Robin said with a wry laugh. "I mean, I stepped back with my fist and just zeroed right in on him. I saw his eyes watch it coming. I don't think he believed I was really going to hit him, but he had to know from the beginning that I was winding up for it." Robin shook her head. "His nose *exploded*; blood and snot everywhere. I had nightmares about it for months."

"How bad did you hurt him?"

"I blacked his eyes and his nose was a swollen mess, but he healed up fine in just a few weeks. It pretty much ruined my high school years though. Every one knew I was gay and that made it hard for me to make friends because everyone was suspect if they spent too much time with me. Poor Bruce had it almost as bad."

"It must have been hard on you."

Robin shrugged. "You get used to what you can't change. I dealt with it by being belligerently proud."

"So how old were you the first time you were with a girl?"

"Not a girl," Robin laughed with some embarrassment. "My first time was my first everything. My 21st birthday, my first gay bar, my first kiss, my first sexual encounter, my first orgasm-everything."

"What was her name?"

"Peg. She was 36 and she ate me up. I was scared to death." Robin blushed remembering that

night. "It never even occurred to me to say no. She put me on the back of her motorcycle, took me to a cheap motel and turned me into silly putty. Looking back, the sex really wasn't that memorable, but I had nothing to measure her against and I thought she was wonderful."

"How do I measure up?"

Robin looked at her in surprise. "You can't be serious. I mean, can't you tell how good you are by how...? You aren't like anyone else I've ever been with. It's like comparing...raisins and passion fruit."

"I just wanted to hear you say it." Maryl hugged Robin's arm. "Nice analogy, by the way."

Robin chuckled at herself for falling into Maryl's trap. "I love it when you use big words," she teased. "It makes me feel all gooey inside."

"Oh!" Maryl exclaimed. "Speaking of gooey...I can't believe I let you talk me into singing for those cretins."

"I was wondering how that went," Robin grinned.

"It was humiliating! Kirsten actually flinched and Brooke covered her ears. Linda patted me on the head like a dog."

"Was the cobbler good?"

"Delicious, but I'm not sure it was worth it. I told you I couldn't sing."

"You sing fine," Robin said truthfully. "You just can't carry a tune. Besides, it's not about how *good* you are; it's about how good you *feel* when you do it."

"Well, it makes me feel bad when dogs howl and children cry."

"What about when it was just you and I? Did it feel good then?"

"That was different."

"Why?"

"I guess because...you didn't seem to mind."

"I *like* that you can't sing."

"That's the first time I've heard that," Maryl laughed. "How come?"

"It's easy to share things you're good at, but very hard to share the bad. I know I twisted your arm, but you sang for me and it made me feel closer to you. It had to be hard for you to do, but

you did it anyway and I'll never forget that."

Maryl gave her a considering look. "What are *you* bad at?"

"Nothing obvious," Robin answered. "Let's see. I can't do that thing with my tongue where you roll it..." Maryl demonstrated. "That's it. And I can't whistle."

"Not at all?"

Robin shook her head and they stopped walking while she tried anyway. Maryl tried to explain it, but no matter how she moved her mouth, she just made herself light-headed.

"You're right," Maryl said as they gave up. "It does make me feel closer to you knowing that you can't do something so simple."

"Simple for you, maybe."

Maryl squeezed her hand. "Let's go eat lunch. I have plans for you."

Robin's nipples hardened to the point they felt brittle and she led the way back to camp.

~***~

Robin lay with her head in Maryl's lap watching the stars and listening to the crackle of the fire. She was using a twig to clean her teeth-having forgotten to bring her toothbrush-and Maryl was leaning back on one hand, stroking Robin's hair with the other. They were both dressed, at least temporarily, against the chill of the evening.

"What are you thinking about?" Robin asked into the silence.

"Just listening to the frogs and crickets." Maryl's voice was soft and dreamy. "Enjoying being here with you."

"You're the best time I've ever had," Robin ventured. Maryl smiled, but it seemed obligatory. Her eyes were sad and lonely. Robin knew in that moment how the future would be and her chest ached. She couldn't bear to let Maryl see her heart break, so she rolled to her side and faced the fire. With nothing left to lose, she said what she had been waiting to say all day. "I love you, Maryl."

"I love you, too."

Hope flared briefly. "But it doesn't matter, does it?"

Maryl was almost whispering. "It matters a great deal."

"Still," Robin persisted, "it's almost over, isn't it?" She waited a long agonizing moment for

Maryl's answer.

"That's how it is with dreams, Robin. They're beautiful while they last, but they always end."

Robin fought the need to cry. She knew it wouldn't help. "Is there someone else?"

"No," Maryl said quickly. "I promise...it's nothing like that."

"Then why?" When she didn't get an immediate answer she began to hope again. "The most important thing is that we love each other. Everything else is geography and finances."

"Everything else is reality," Maryl said with tears in her voice. "We have lives and habits and needs that we're going back to. Hearts and bodies aren't enough to build a relationship on."

This didn't make any sense to Robin. "But it's the best place to start."

"It's more likely to be the beginning of the end."

"That's pretty cynical."

"Perhaps. But I'm not leaving Edgewater and you need your family."

"That's for me to decide."

"True," Maryl admitted. "But I won't ask you to leave them behind. They're more important to you than you may realize and they need you, too."

Robin was feeling a little desperate and angry. "You left *your* family."

"My family and yours are *nothing* alike. Our relationships to our families are completely different. Leaving my family was a matter of emotional survival. Your family completes you." Maryl sighed. "But it's not just family, Robin. Are you going to quit your job and start over as a cashier? That's not very realistic."

"Who's to say what kind of position I could find in Edgewater? It might be a step up, not a step down."

"What about friends?"

"I'll make new friends." Maryl's hand left her hair and Robin turned to see her face. She had her hand over her mouth and tears were rolling down her cheeks. Robin sat up and put one hand over Maryl's legs for balance as she looked into her face. "What is it really, Maryl? No more excuses. If you don't love me the way I love you, say so. I can understand that. But to just...*dismiss* the possibility of a future with me without a reason-I need to understand, Maryl. Don't do this to us without involving me."

Maryl closed her eyes and shook her head.

Robin looked around as if for help. The only thing she could think of was to explain why understanding was so important to her, so she took a deep, calming breath. "My last lover's name was Tammy. We were together for 12 years. I left her on our twelfth anniversary. The last year I was with her was a nightmare because she wouldn't talk to me. One day everything seemed fine and the next day she hated me. I don't know why, but I tried everything."

It made Robin feel hopeless all over again just remembering. "She wouldn't go to counseling with me, so I went alone. Of course that did absolutely nothing for her. If I made a special meal, she ate in front of the TV or went to bed without eating. She couldn't bear for me to touch her so I slept on the sofa. If I asked how her day was, she told me it was none of my business. I wasn't folding the clothes right. I wasn't washing the dishes properly. I was running the vacuum over the carpet nap incorrectly. I swear, I couldn't do even one thing to her satisfaction. If I paid the bills I was nagging. If I didn't pay the bills I was selfish. I bought the wrong kind of toilet paper and laundry soap and toothpaste. We had a huge fight once over tomato sauce. I bought her gifts and she either ignored them or pawned them. I would bring her flowers and as soon as I left the room, she would throw them away. And through it all, every single time I tried to talk to her and find out what was wrong, she told me I was imagining things and that there was nothing to talk about. *I still don't know why she stopped loving me.*" Robin used the backs of her fingers to wipe away Maryl's tears. "If you don't at least try to make me understand, it would be the cruelest thing you could do to me. *Please, baby.* Talk to me."

Maryl leaned into her with a sob and a nod. Robin pulled her into her lap and wrapped the blanket about them both. "Take your time, lover. Take all the time you want. You have my undivided attention."

Maryl cried for a long while and Robin rocked her patiently. Maryl eventually quieted enough to talk, but her words were halting and pained.

"My last relationship lasted 31 weeks. That's the longest relationship I've ever had. I've only had two last longer than 4 months. They always leave me and they usually do something hateful to say goodbye."

Robin wanted to say something to make it all right, but Maryl wasn't finished.

"I can't remember how many times I've been cheated on. My checking account has been cleaned out twice and all of my furniture disappeared once. My car has been thrashed and all of the windows in my house have been broken. I've been slapped and pushed and called horrible names."

Maryl choked on her words, but continued on. "I came home from work a few months ago to find my girlfriend, in my bed, sandwiched happily between two men and she couldn't even remember their names. They didn't even bother to stop. She tried to get me to join in and called me a prude when I refused."

Robin felt sick.

"It's always something," Maryl cried. "I'm too sexually adventurous. I'm not adventurous enough. I'm too focused on material comfort. I don't have enough education. My politics are all wrong. I'm godless or I worship the wrong god. It's not fair that I only pay half the bills. I don't care enough. I care too much." Maryl's face twisted up in self-recrimination. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong!"

Robin couldn't fix what Maryl was saying in her head. It seemed so at odds with the woman she had come to know. It was flat impossible to believe that Maryl was at fault in any of it. The idea that she somehow deserved such treatment was ludicrous. Perhaps her choices in women were poor, but Robin couldn't believe that Maryl was unlovable: that she was doing something in her everyday life that drove women mad. Granted, she didn't know what Maryl was like at home, but even so...

"You're afraid I'll leave you, too," Robin said quietly. "That I'll hurt you and leave you alone."

Maryl nodded through fresh tears.

Robin kissed her forehead. "I'm not like them, babe. You'll see."

"No," Maryl cried. "I need..."

Robin waited for a moment, but Maryl didn't speak. "Tell me, Maryl. Whatever it is, tell me."

Maryl couldn't stop crying and she spoke through her sobs. "I need *one* good memory. I need to have one memory to cherish—one thing no one can take away from me. I need a memory I can hold in my heart when they cheat and steal and scream that they hate me. I need one person who loved me and didn't leave. I need to know that dreams are possible. Just one thing to make me feel hope."

"Hope for what?"

"Hope that someday I'll find someone."

Robin looked full into Maryl's face. "And if I'm her?" She watched as Maryl struggled for the control to speak.

"If something seems too good to be true, it is."

Robin was stunned into silence. All the pieces slid neatly into place and she could see for the first time how broken Maryl felt. She knew that Maryl was on retreat with a support group, but it never really occurred to her that Maryl had a reason for being in it. The epiphany brought no joy—only grief—and she let her tears fall unchecked. She *knew* that Maryl loved her. She *knew* that she was the best thing Maryl had ever felt and she *knew* she had to let her go. There was nothing she could say or do that would break through Maryl's fear in a single night without destroying any

chance that one day they might be together.

Robin looked up at the stars with a watery gaze and searched for a spark of hope in her own heart. When she found it, she nurtured the uncertain flicker until she felt strong enough to be what Maryl needed.

Maryl's hands were knotted tightly against her chest and Robin gently took one. She eased her hand open and laid it over her heart. She looked into Maryl's tormented face. "Can you feel my heartbeat?" Maryl hesitated a moment and then nodded. "Listen to me very carefully." Robin poured all of her emotion into her voice in an effort to make her believe. "*I love you. And I know that you love me just as much. Until it's time to go, that's all there is between us. Just love.*"

She ignored Maryl's sobs and began making love to her. Their bodies were desperately intent on wringing every last moment of intimacy and bliss from their time together and the only words they spoke were of love.

~***~

Robin woke late and instantly knew she was alone. Even knowing, she still had to see. She sat up and looked around the small beach. All of Maryl's things were gone and it took her a moment to identify what was different beyond that one devastating fact.

Small river rocks had been collected and placed beside her to spell the words 'I love you'. Robin felt something relentless come out of the ground and enter her body. It moved faster and faster until it erupted from her throat and echoed off the hills. She could feel leaves shake loose from the trees and rocks tremble. For a moment, the river reversed course.

She fell to the side and sobbed until she was empty of all but that tiny flicker of hope and she embraced it. With her mission firmly in place, Robin collected every rock Maryl had left for her, threw her belongings together in a jumble and headed downstream. She felt clearer, more focused and more driven than ever before. Less than 10 minutes later she found Bruce waiting for her on the path with concern in his eyes. He waded out to walk beside her.

"It's over then." It wasn't a question.

"That's what she thinks," Robin said with grim purpose.

Bruce grinned. "You go, girl."

Part Three

Maryl took a seat in the back and stuffed her pillow between her head and the side of the van.

Folding her arms to protect her bruised heart, she closed her eyes and willed the others to leave her in peace. Her eyes were dry, but she cried all the way back to town. She felt alternately hopeless and grateful. She had her memory and she was both lifted up by it and cast into the abyss. She knew Robin was hurting-she imagined she could feel it-and she regretted it. She could only hope that her last message was understood. Always and forever she would remember Robin with nothing but love. She hoped that Robin's family would be there for her and ease some of the pain.

The other women in the van carried on their own conversations and did not pressure her to talk. Even Linda was very nearly personable. The miles stretched endlessly and it seemed to take longer to get home than it had taken to get up to the campsite. It was with relief that they finally pulled up to Eva's house. Unloading the van and getting everyone's belongings sorted out took some time, but at the end of it Eva collected them all in a group hug. Maryl didn't especially like the group hugs-they were too impersonal and unsatisfying-but she participated because it was expected of her. Eva set the date for their next meeting and Maryl honestly didn't know if she would go or not.

Eva followed her to her car and put her hand on the door to prevent her opening it. "I'm worried about you, Maryl."

She leaned back against her Toyota and firmly pushed her pain away. "I'm okay. Really."

"I know you want me to believe that," Eva said with understanding. "But I don't."

Maryl folded her arms and ground her teeth before speaking. "I'm exactly where I choose to be. No one did this to me. I have what I wanted and I'll learn to live with it. Today is probably the hardest."

"I hope it was worth it," Eva said with tenderness and compassion. "Call me at any time if you want to talk. Anything you tell me outside the group stays private. I promise."

"Thanks, Eva. For everything." She accepted Eva's hug in the spirit with which it was given, then waved goodbye to the others and drove away. Her first stop, and the one she needed most, was at the kennel to pick up Rupert, her six-year-old Chow.

"How's my big boy? Oh, yes!" She laughed as he licked her face in a frenzy of excitement. "Mommy missed her handsome little man," she crooned. "Yes, she did!" He was wiggling too hard to allow a truly satisfying hug, but Maryl knew he would be all over her once he had a chance to get home and realize that things were back to normal. She paid the second half of the boarding fee with genuine thanks and took Rupert out to the car. "Do you want to go home, Ru?"

He barked until she opened the car door and then began to bounce from front seat to back. She slid into the driver's seat and he took a long, investigative sniff at her hair. His interest and antics restored some of her humor and the rest of the drive home was a pleasure.

Rupert raced through the house, rolling on the carpet and making sure no one had peed on his favorite backyard post. Maryl carried her things inside and began getting her life back on track.

There was a sadness to it, but it was comforting as well.

All of her plants needed watering and the mail needed to be dealt with. She put her camping clothes in the laundry and threw the hated sleeping bag out in the carport. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with it, but she knew she was never going to use it again. She considered taking it back to the store and having words with the clerk, but decided it wouldn't do any good. Most of the messages on her machine were from tele-marketers and the rest were from people she considered part-time friends.

When everything was in satisfactory order, Maryl ran a hot bath and eased into it with a groan of pleasure. The hot water was soothing to muscles stiff and sore from lovemaking and her heart catalogued each spot for future retrieval.

She was snuggling with Rupert on the sofa later that evening when the phone rang. She reached over her head for it without needing to look. "Hello."

"Welcome home," Janelle's cheerful voice rang out. "How was your trip?"

After being best friends for nine years and co-workers for over four, this was the one person Maryl was most relieved to hear on the other end of the line. "Not bad. How did things go at work?"

"You don't even want to know. Besides, I didn't call about work. Are you glad you went?"

Maryl's heart broke and soared at the same time. "Very."

"From the way you talked, you didn't think you'd have a good time. They must be easier to get along with than you thought."

"Sometimes, yes. Other times, no. But all in all it went pretty well."

There was silence on the line for a long moment. "You sound kind of depressed. What's wrong?"

"I'm just very tired." It wasn't a complete lie. "I'm lying here with Rupert trying to catch up on what's been going on in the world. I think I'll skip dinner and go to bed."

"Okay. Do you want to get together tomorrow? You can show me your tan lines and bug bites and I'll tell you about *Carlos*."

"Who's Carlos?"

"A guy I met in the grocery store."

Maryl smiled tiredly at Janelle's naughty tone of voice. "You're not going to show up at the crack of dawn, are you?"

"On a Sunday? I'll aim for noon like always."

"Okay. See you then."

~***~

Maryl was watering the front lawn when Janelle drove up in her ancient (*It's a classic!*) El Camino. She shook her head with a patient grin as it struggled to stay running even as Janelle bounced up the walk. She was starting to wonder if it intended to take itself for a drive when it choked and died with an exaggerated sigh.

"I still think that hunk of junk is sentient," Maryl said.

"It should be after all the attention I give it."

Maryl returned Janelle's hug, careful to keep the hose pointed away from her. Janelle sat down on her front steps as she dragged the hose over so she could reach the nasturtiums that grew outside her bedroom window. "So, tell me about Carlos. How did you meet?"

"Produce, of course. It's the best place because you can tell right away if they're gay or married."

"How do you figure that?"

"Gay men know how to pick ripe fruit and married men don't shop for produce."

Maryl grimaced at Janelle's matter-of-fact statement. "You do know how terribly stereotypical that is, don't you?"

"Stereotypes exist for a reason," Janelle pointed out. "Anyhow, he was trying to figure out which watermelon to buy and I helped him."

"Were you there for a reason or just cruising?"

"Both, of course! You know I never go to the store just to shop."

"Actually," Maryl admitted. "I *didn't* know that. So then what happened?"

"I asked him to help me pick out condoms."

Maryl flung water in Janelle's direction.

"It *is* his area of expertise," Janelle complained. "And it sends an important message right off the bat." She paused for effect. "That I'm available."

Maryl smiled with affection. "Tramp."

"Ouch! That hurts."

"Yeah, right. Did he call yet?"

"Of course! He's taking me to see Macy Gray next Friday."

"Lucky you!"

Janelle leaned back on her elbows with satisfaction. "He's cute, too."

"I hope it works out." Maryl turned off the water and coiled the hose neatly. She pushed at Janelle with her knee as she went inside and Janelle followed her.

"So tell me more about your trip. Did you sit around and cry all the time? Or did you have fun?"

Maryl knew it was inevitable that she would tell her friend all about Robin, but she just couldn't say it straight out. This was going to be one of those times that she needed the information drug out of her a piece at a time. "I learned to skip rocks," she offered.

"Ooh!" Janelle wiggled her fingers. "Sounds exciting."

"It was. I guess you had to be there."

"Not me," she said with relief. "It's not camping unless there's an RV and satellite television." Janelle sat down at the kitchen table. "I'm dying to know what seven lesbians do for fun when they're stranded in the wilderness. Fill me in."

"Just camping stuff," Maryl shrugged. "Swimming, hiking, talking, camp fires, roasting marshmallows, swatting bugs. The usual. One day they wove little baskets out of grass and another day they picked berries for a cobbler."

"They?" Janelle's eyes concentrated on her. "What were *you* doing?"

Maryl opened the refrigerator and pulled out a couple of sodas. She shook one up and slid it across the table to her friend. "I went for a walk."

"I know that look," Janelle grinned. She slipped a finger under the tab and pointed the can at Maryl. "Don't make me mess up your kitchen. You've got a secret lover and you *will* tell me *all* about it. Which one was it?"

"None." Maryl ducked and held up her hand. "I swear!"

"Then who? I thought you were going someplace isolated."

"We did."

"But?"

Maryl pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Janelle. "There was a campground a couple of miles downstream."

"No way." Janelle's eyes were huge. "So, who is she? What's she like? How did you meet? When are you going to see her again?"

Maryl wondered how long it would take to stop tearing up every time she thought about Robin.

"Hey," her friend said with concern. "Hey, what happened?"

Maryl tried to smile as she brushed a tear away. "I fell in love."

"But that's great, isn't it? How does she feel about you?"

"She loves me, too, but it will never work out."

"Why? Is she married? Dying? What?"

Maryl shook her head and stared at the soda can between her hands. "Nothing like that. She's perfect. But it would never work between us and we agreed not to see each other again. It's for the best."

"Did you sleep with her?"

Memory ambushed her with a shiver. "Yes."

"You just met someone camping and went to bed with her."

Maryl was uncomfortable with the way that sounded. "It wasn't like that."

"Well?" Janelle crooked her fingers as if beckoning her.

"We talked and went for walks and swam and played mostly. I've never felt so safe or relaxed with anyone before. Making love was just an extension of what we felt."

"How long did you spend with her?"

"Most of four days."

Janelle's face tightened with concentration. "If you love each other, why did you decide not to see each other again? Whose idea was it?"

Mine. "We talked about it, Janelle. We decided together."

Janelle buried her face in her hands and groaned. "Oh, Maryl. What if she was The One?"

"You don't even believe in The One, Janelle." Maryl felt the need to justify herself. "You tell me that all the time. You laugh at me for hoping. Don't start giving me a hard time because this time I got smart." Maryl was on her feet and in spite of the fact that she was crying, she felt angry. "*This time, I left. And I did it when everything was good. They were the best four days of my life and she can never take them away or call them a lie or make them ugly. She let me go because she understood. Not because she doesn't love me. She does love me, damn it! She does!*"

Maryl's anger vanished and she ran to her room. She slammed the door and fell to her bed weeping. A few seconds later, Janelle crawled over her and took her in her arms. Maryl buried her face in her shoulder, grateful for a sympathetic place to express her anguish.

"You stupid little twit," Janelle soothed. "What am I going to do with you?"

"She *does* love me," Maryl insisted.

"I believe you. I just...never mind. Cry it all out and then you can tell me how wonderful she was."

~***~

Getting back to work helped her make the final transition from fantasy to reality. It took most of the first week back to straighten out the confusion left by her absence and Janelle ran a discreet screen for her so no one would delve too deeply into her trip. But even when she was most distracted, her body and spirit remembered Robin. She felt tired all the time and was worried at first that she was coming down with something, but she finally decided it was emotional and knew that it would pass eventually.

She was prepared for the nights to be the most difficult in terms of loneliness and despair, but to her surprise it was the mornings that were hardest. At night she would fall into bed, throw an arm over Rupert and lose consciousness almost immediately. She woke up in the mornings, however, with a feeling of excitement that withered as soon as she realized that Robin was gone forever. Crying through her shower became a new morning ritual.

She thought she had a handle on it, but 12 days after returning from the mountains, one of the doctors pulled her aside and offered to give her a physical and run some blood tests. Maryl had not been aware that her emotional distress was a visible phenomenon. She reassured him that she would be fine and he reluctantly backed off, but as a wake up call it was extremely effective. She had been ignoring Janelle's pestering about eating and when she stepped on the office scale to discover that she had lost 14 pounds, she was horrified. Looking at her face in the mirror she realized how gaunt she had become. All of her bones seemed to be more prominent and she was embarrassed that she had let it come to this.

When she started eating again she began to feel better. Her evening runs with Rupert stopped being debilitating and her mind became clearer. She still missed Robin something terrible, but

the memories no longer seemed to be eating her alive.

At the last minute she decided to attend group. It wasn't that she felt that she was getting a lot out of it, but just having the support available to her made her feel better. Most of the evening was devoted to a new member, Paula, whose longtime companion had recently died of pancreatic cancer. She seemed to be in shock, not quite convinced that tragedy had come knocking at her door. Maryl was glad to hear that she was also going to a therapist and had come to their group just to be around other people instead of sitting alone in her empty house.

Before the evening broke up, Kirsten fixed Maryl with a concerned stare. "You've lost weight."

"I've already gained some of it back," Maryl said easily.

"Were you sick?"

It was far easier to smudge the truth than explain. "Yes. But I'm feeling much better now."

"And emotionally?" Eva asked. "Are you sorry you left her up in the mountains?"

Maryl's heart screamed *Yes!* "I do miss her more than I expected," she admitted. "But I did the right thing."

Driving home afterwards, she realized that listening to someone else's bereavement had lightened some of her own. She wasn't sure whether to feel bad about gaining some peace of mind from Paula's loss or not. Considering that she had not taken any pleasure from Paula's story, she decided that she was probably pretty normal and left it at that.

The next two weeks were better. Her health improved and she stopped feeling so tired. An echo of sadness accompanied her at all times and she still woke up with the agony of loss, but she seemed to have the strength to handle it. The first time she laughed at something in the office, Janelle got tears in her eyes and hugged her.

"I've missed you," she whispered.

"Have I been that bad?"

Janelle's face was fully open to her. "Yes."

That a simple chuckle would bring such a response from her dearest friend made Maryl feel terrible.

"I've seen you pick up the pieces of your life more times than I can count," Janelle said quietly. "This is different. You're doing all the things you're supposed to do, but *you*..." Janelle poked at her chest. "*You* never came home."

Janelle went back to work and Maryl shuffled papers, unable to concentrate on anything. She felt

vaguely angry, but she knew her friend was right. She *had* left something important on that small beach and she didn't want to admit it. *I just need more time. It'll pass.*

The next group meeting came and Maryl sat quietly on Eva's couch. Something seemed different and after a time she realized that it was Noreen. She seemed to be watching everyone with a secret smile. They began to keep an eye on each other and even though Maryl knew that something was about to happen, she was still surprised when Noreen spoke into a moment of silence.

"I'm not coming to group anymore. It's time for me to move on."

Maryl's smile grew as the others sat in stunned shock. Eva recovered first. "Good for you, Noreen. What changed for you?"

"Something Maryl said on the camping trip."

"Me?"

"'Permission to stop hurting'. Remember?"

Maryl nodded.

"It's not in control of me anymore. I knew it when you said it, but I wanted to be sure. Now I am. I feel better every day and as much as I enjoy being with all of you, I need to get on with my life. I need to stop dwelling on the past and start planning for my future."

Maryl was happy for Noreen and added her good wishes to those of the group. When the meeting broke up, she followed Noreen to her truck. "Noreen? I want to tell you something and I only hope it doesn't come out all twisted up."

Noreen put her elbow up on the side of the truck bed and crossed one foot over the other.

"Shoot."

Maryl took a deep breath. "I don't really see us being the kind of friends who hang out and talk on the phone. Do you?"

"Honestly? No. We're too different."

"Good," Maryl said with relief. "I just wanted you to know that I'm your friend anyway. We don't have to be buddies, but...I like you. I don't expect we'll see each other much, but I care about you anyway. Am I making any sense?"

Noreen laughed easily. "Yeah. I know exactly what you're saying and the same goes for me."

They hugged briefly, but hard and Noreen got in her truck. Maryl turned to walk away, but Noreen called her name and she went back to the open window. Noreen leaned out and reached for her hand. "I want to say something to you, too. I never met your lady in the mountains, but I

know she was special to you. *As your friend*, I'm telling you that you're an idiot for letting her get away."

Maryl tried to make a joke out of it. "That seems to be the general consensus."

"What does that tell you? Figure it out, Maryl."

She stood there with nothing to say as Noreen started up her truck and drove away.

~***~

The rituals of everyday life got easier, but when she didn't have anything else to do, Maryl's head was filled with other people's words. *You're the best time I've ever had. You never came home. You're an idiot for letting her get away. The most important thing is that we love each other. Figure it out, Maryl. Are you sorry you left her up in the mountains?*

The only escape was distraction. In the midst of deep cleaning her little house she decided it needed painting. She coaxed her landlord into springing for half the cost of the paint-more than willing to pay for the other half herself just so she'd have something constructive to do-and two days later she laid on the first brush stroke. Janelle offered to help if Maryl kept the stereo and the beer running and in only a week the inside of her house took on a warm and creamy yellow cast. After years of dingy white, it was an exciting change and well worth the cost and the lingering paint fumes.

The landlord dropped by a few days afterwards and was so pleased with the results he wrote her a check on the spot for her half of the expense. The pride she felt over a job well done made her mood improve and even if the voices still plagued her in her private moments, she felt a little more like her old self.

The one thing she needed most and wanted least was a social life. Going to Eva's group could only be considered marginally social, and as enjoyable as spending time with Janelle was, she knew it was time to start getting out on her own. The problem was, none of the people she had socialized with were satisfying to her anymore and none of the things she used to do made her feel good. Going to the local gay bar on Saturday nights had just become loud and depressing. She tried going to small casual dinners with old friends, but they were focused on finding her a new lover and none of the women they introduced her to ignited any sparks.

It occurred to her at one point that she was comparing them all to Robin, but she honestly couldn't see how that was a bad thing. After all the failed relationships she had been in, maybe it was time to raise her standards to a new level. She had a perfect track record of choosing the wrong woman. She was more than willing to spend some time alone if it meant that she could avoid some future heartbreak and wait for a woman she could build a life with.

Her memory of Robin began to be a source of pleasure for her when drawn out in moderation. If she allowed herself to dwell on their time together it was too painful, but she could wonder from time to time what Robin would think or do or feel about whatever Maryl was experiencing and it

gave her a warm glow. It became a subconscious game for her. The flowers in her yard gave her more pleasure when she imagined Robin admiring them. She spent one long Sunday afternoon looking at clothes with a mind to how Robin would look in that sweater and what she would think of Maryl in this skirt.

She didn't realize how pervasive her thoughts had become until she found herself in the grocery store one day trying to pick out a wine Robin might like and saw her double walking past the end of the aisle. She searched the store from one end to the other and could not find a woman who even remotely resembled Robin. She left the store feeling hollow and exposed, determined to get her habits under control.

The very next day she could have sworn she saw Robin driving the opposite direction on Main Street. It gave her the shakes and she had to pull over while she got over them. She told herself that she was being ridiculous; she would probably not even recognize Robin fully clothed, but it was small consolation to her heart.

The third incident happened on her way to work several days later. There was no way she could go back to see if the woman walking into the Oak Furniture Warehouse really looked like Robin or if she was losing her mind without being late to her job.

Maryl grabbed a cup of coffee first thing and almost ran into Janelle in the hall.

"Hey, watch where you point that thing," Janelle said of her coffee cup.

"Sorry. I'm a little distracted."

"What's up?"

Maryl glanced around. There were too many people near and they would be busy soon. "Are you free for lunch?"

"Are you buying?"

Maryl nodded and headed for her desk. She was aware that Janelle studied her now and then during the long morning, but there just wasn't time to talk.

Lunchtime gradually rolled around and they walked next door to the hospital cafeteria. "You don't look so good," Janelle said to start her talking.

"I think I'm going nuts."

"Why do you think that?"

Maryl wasn't very comfortable saying it out loud, but it was the only way. "I keep catching glimpses of women who remind me of Robin."

"How long has it been since you last saw her?"

Embarrassed that she knew without having to think about it, Maryl hid her face. "Seven weeks, five days and about six hours. Pitiful, huh?"

Janelle put her arm through Maryl's with a laugh. "Yeah, but it's cute, too. I'll bet your memory of precisely how she looked is starting to blur and that's why you're suddenly seeing her."

Maryl thought this was doubtless true, but it made her sad. "It's funny though. The glimpses seem to make my memory clearer. I remember how she looked *better* after I think I've seen her. Not her features so much, but the long lines of her and the way her hair layers over her shoulders."

"Do you regret saying goodbye to her?"

Janelle's eyes were full of sympathy and it gave Maryl the courage to tell the truth. "Sometimes I miss her so bad I can hardly breathe. I *know* I did the right thing, but sometimes I do regret it."

Janelle hugged her arm. "You seem so certain that she loves you. Maybe you should try to find her and just talk."

"No." Maryl shook her head and opened the hospital's side door for her. "I'm sure it will pass. I just need more time."

"I wonder if she imagines that she sees you, too?"

Maryl didn't want to think about that. She needed to believe that Robin was getting on with her life. "How's it going with Carlos? It's getting close to two months that you've been going out and I still haven't met him."

"If I hadn't been to his house I might think he was married. I only get to see him on the weekends. I really like him and I think he likes me, too, but I'm starting to think that something's not quite right."

Maryl made the appropriate noises, asked questions in the right places and let Janelle carry the conversation through lunch.

~***~

Maryl couldn't help but keep an eye out for anyone who looked like Robin as she drove to group that night. It made her feel a little hunted, but somewhere in town was a woman she needed to see up close so she could stop reacting every time she saw her. She resolved that the very next time she thought she saw Robin, she would stop whatever she was doing and find her.

She sat quietly in group, letting the others talk and replayed images in her mind, trying to find something about this new woman she was seeing that didn't mesh with her memories. At some

point she realized that the room was silent and everyone was looking at her. "Sorry," she said with a start. "Did you ask me something?"

Eva chuckled. "I asked how things were going with you, but you seem a little preoccupied. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine." Now that she had an opportunity to talk, she wanted to. "I've been trying to be more social, but it seems like everything has changed. The things I used to do for fun just don't seem fun anymore."

"Like what?" Brooke asked.

"Going to the bar on Saturday nights. Visiting with old friends. A couple of women have asked me out, but I seem to know right away that it's pointless. I just don't have feelings for them."

"And your feelings for Alaine?" Eva asked.

Maryl waved her hand dismissively. "I haven't even thought of her for weeks. She's ancient history."

Wendy spoke cautiously. "So you're not mad at her anymore?"

Maryl shook her head. "No. I hope she finds whatever she's looking for and it makes her happy."

"Why are you still coming to group?" Linda sounded more curious than belligerent for once.

"To be honest, I don't think I ever came to group because of Alaine. I think I was coming because I felt somehow defective. Alaine was the longest relationship of my life and I guess I thought that I was doing something wrong that my lovers never stayed."

"Do you still think that?" Paula asked.

Maryl realized that she didn't, at least not on an intellectual level. "No. I don't."

Eva smiled. "So why do you have such trouble keeping women around?"

Maryl smiled back. "A lifetime of poor choices, I guess. I think I've always chosen women who were available or because they seemed to want me. I don't know if it's because I was trained to do what other people want or if I'm just weak, but the end result was one bad choice after another. Maybe that's what I was doing wrong."

"Did you ever love any of those women?"

Maryl sighed. "I thought so at the time, but I'm not sure I ever knew what love was. I think I was hunting for crumbs of love. I don't think it speaks very well of me that I was willing to be with anyone who showed an interest in me. If someone kissed me it was love. If someone said I was

beautiful it was love. If someone liked me as a friend it was love."

"Why? What started that pattern?"

"It has to be my family." Maryl saw her whole life in new terms. "All my life I was given love when I obeyed and conformed and performed. When I did what they thought I should, they loved me. When I looked the way I should or said what I was supposed to say, they gave me love. If I ever stepped out of line, they took it away. When I came out to them as a lesbian, they never got over it. I ended up moving out here to get away from their disapproval and their rules, but now it looks like I brought all of their baggage with me. I think I choose women who don't really care about me because that's the kind of love I'm accustomed to getting."

"What about the woman you met on the camping trip?" Brooke asked.

Paula looked around. "What woman?"

Linda leaned towards Paula. "We went on a camping trip a couple of months ago and Maryl met someone. She spent most of the trip with her, but they decided not to see each other again. I'm not sure why."

Maryl was in shock at the change in Linda. She hadn't seemed any different at the last meeting and now she was suddenly considerate and peaceable. She looked at Eva for a clue and saw a knowing smile. Reassured that it was a change in Linda and not another sign of her impending insanity, Maryl pretended not to notice.

Brooke returned to her question. "Was she different somehow?"

Maryl allowed her feelings for Robin to surface for a moment so she could examine them. "I think so, but it's hard to be sure. I find myself doubting how I feel about everything. I loved her at the time and I still miss her constantly, but I'm not sure if I can trust that it was love." She pulled her legs up underneath her and snuggled into the corner of the couch. "I've been thinking about love at first sight. Now that I've had a chance to process it, I have an answer if anyone wants to hear it."

Linda grinned and the others nodded. "I do believe in it," Maryl said. "But I don't think that it's enough. I love a lot of things, but being in love is entirely different. Love can happen in an instant, but being *in* love takes time and commitment. I think that love at first sight, as a reality, probably only happens to men. I think women need more. We need security and trust on every level and that just doesn't happen in a second. The potential for being in love can happen in a heartbeat, but it takes time for it to become actualized. If it feels like love at first sight and then grows into being in love, it can be said that it's a real phenomenon. But I think it would be more accurate to say that women experience attraction at first sight and most of the time it turns out to be an illusion."

Wendy was listening closely. "What was it you felt for her? Love at first sight or attraction at first sight?"

"It felt like love at first sight," Maryl admitted. "Now that I'll never see her again, I can call it that and there isn't any reason to think otherwise."

"That's why you decided not to see each other," Kirsten said slowly. "So that you could be in love with her for the rest of your life and never risk that it wasn't real."

Maryl hugged a pillow to her chest and tried to pretend she didn't have tears in her eyes. "Something like that."

Brooke sat back and folded her arms. "Maybe I'm not getting it, but that sounds like the stupidest thing I ever heard. What if it really was love and you threw it away? How do you live with the uncertainty?"

Maryl lifted her chin. "I'm doing the best that I can, Brooke. I don't have all the answers. But if her memory helps me not jump helter skelter into substandard relationships, it's all worth it."

The conversation spread into other areas and Maryl tried to pay attention, but she couldn't help wondering if she had made the right choice. When the meeting broke up, Eva made a point of holding her back. Linda was the last to leave and Eva brought a bottle of scotch and two shot glasses to the coffee table.

"You look like you could use a drink."

"Only if you'll have one with me."

"Of course," Eva laughed. She poured for the both of them and they drank without ritual.

"What's up with Linda?" Maryl asked. "She was almost sensitive."

"Just between you and I, she's been coming around to the fact that her attitude incites negative reactions in other people ever since the camping trip. She went to a doctor and discussed it with her. She started taking medications about three weeks ago. They take a while to kick in and they seem to be working."

"Wow." Maryl shook her head. "I don't usually subscribe to the idea that we should medicate our moods, but she definitely seems better."

"I've always thought she should be on medication, but it was never my place to suggest it. Her attitude always seemed to be out of her control to me, so I'm glad to see that she's taking charge of it. I talked to her the other day about it and she feels much happier with herself. She can finally see how abrasive she was and it embarrasses her."

"Maybe she really did need it. I'm glad for her."

Eva poured them another round and sat back with her drink in her hand. "You've gone through a

lot of changes recently, too."

"I don't understand them all yet. Most of what I said tonight was brand new and it may take some time to put it all in perspective."

Eva searched her face. "You *did* love her."

Maryl bit off her tears and nodded.

"You *still* love her. In my opinion, you should find her and talk to her. I think I understand why you want her to be in your past, but you may never love anyone like that again and it would be a sin to let it go. It's not too late to go to her. I'll never say this again, but I think ending it to begin with was senseless and cruel. For both of you."

Maryl wiped her tears away and downed her second drink. "Sometimes I agree with you, but I just couldn't take her away from her family. They're so close."

"I'm close to my family as well," Eva remarked. "Very close. It's a nine-hour drive to where they live, but we talk on the phone all the time and we get together several times a year. Being apart makes our gatherings that much more precious and I don't have to deal with any of the unpleasant things."

"I don't think her family has unpleasantness."

"*All* families have unpleasantness. I don't have to attend school plays and recitals and Little League games or buy cookies and gift-wrap and sponsor walk-a-thons. I don't have to baby-sit at the drop of the hat or get sucked into little family squabbles. I get to hear about everything after it's resolved and has become a joke. When we do get together, everyone is happy to see me and I get to be the star attraction. Living apart from family is not a terrible thing."

"Still," Maryl insisted, "I couldn't ask her to leave them. She needs them."

Eva sighed. "I just hope you made the right choice."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. "Was there a specific reason you wanted me to stay after?"

Eva frowned to herself and leaned forward to set her drink on the table. "I need a favor and I'm a little uncomfortable about asking."

"Why?"

"Asking for help is not my strong point; especially from a group member. I feel like it's my function to provide help, not receive it."

"I think we both know," Maryl said gently, "that I'll be moving on now. If not this meeting, then the next. I've done what I needed to do in group."

"That's what I thought."

"What can I do for you, Eva?"

"It's not really for me." Eva seemed nervous. "I'm looking for information for someone else. I saw a program recently on television. It was about women who lose...sexual function after having a hysterectomy. I guess it happens a lot more than people think."

"It does." Maryl had heard about this and she remembered seeing the program as well. "It wasn't that long ago that doctors believed menstrual cramps were a figment of our imagination. It's only been just recently that the medical profession has started talking about this new problem and even then they can't all agree that it even happens. Just because they can point to a body part or explain its function doesn't mean that they understand how it all works together. It makes perfect sense to me that a hysterectomy *could* destroy a link in the chain of sexual response. A woman's sexual response is far more difficult to understand and quantify than a man's is. You can bet that if men were becoming impotent after vasectomies, there would be congressional intervention."

Maryl stopped herself. It was too easy to jump on the soapbox and start ranting, but that wasn't what Eva needed. The thought of all the misery that women were experiencing over this particular thing made her sick to her stomach. She worried that Eva *was* the one it had happened to, but then tiny pieces of information clicked into a believable picture. "Kirsten."

Eva slumped, her face a mask of pain, and Maryl knew the rest. "You're in love with her." The agony in Eva's eyes told it all. "Does she know?"

"I don't know. It's complicated."

Maryl nodded in sympathy. Now she knew what to do. "I know of a doctor-not in my office-who is furious that nothing is being done on a large scale to find a way to treat it. She's relatively new to this area, but from the few times I've had contact with her, she's sharp. At the very least, she will validate it as a real and serious problem. She intimidates a lot of the male doctors, but then, they think it's a psychosomatic issue. If there's anyone in this area who knows what's going on and the treatments that are being tried, it's her. I know for sure she has several patients who have suffered the same loss and maybe she would be willing to introduce Kirsten to other women so she can talk about it. If you've got a phone book, I can circle her number for you."

In seconds, Eva was sitting next to her as she flipped through the yellow pages. "There she is."

Eva began to cry, but she was smiling, too. "Thank you, Maryl. No matter what happens, I owe you one."

"Oh, please!" Maryl threw her arm over Eva's shoulders. "You do so much for us and we do so little in return. I just hope Kirsten gets some help and you two work it out. I think you'd be great together and if there's anything else I can do, just let me know."

~***~

Maryl left work on Friday with no idea what she was going to do over the weekend. She was in her car with the engine running before she saw the notepaper under her windshield wiper. It wasn't uncommon to find flyers for events and services on her car after work and she didn't give it much thought until she had it in her hand. Unlike the usual missives, this one was handwritten in graceful, flowing script. She felt the blood draining from her body as she read.

I was wrong to let you believe that I could walk away and never see you again. You are the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. You are my dream and I believe in dreams with all my heart. When you are ready to talk, call me at any hour. Robin Griffith

A local phone number was written at the bottom of the page and Maryl cried with a poignant blend of joy and fear. She knew in an instant that the woman she had been seeing around town *was* Robin. She put her forehead to the steering wheel in disbelieving shock. "Omigod...omigod...omigod..."

"Hey, Maryl. What's wrong?"

Janelle had her hand on the open window and was looking in at her with concern. Maryl put her head back against the headrest of her seat. "She's here."

"Who?"

"Robin." Maryl held the note up. "She's here. It's her I've been seeing. She was here. At my car. She was right here."

Janelle took the note and quickly scanned it. "Oh, Maryl! This is so romantic!"

Maryl closed her eyes and shook her head. "This is wrong. All wrong. She's not supposed to be here."

"But this is wonderful! She really *does* love you!"

"She's not supposed to be here!"

"She *is* here," Janelle said firmly. "And it's about damn time. When you're not manic, you mope. I'm getting pretty sick of it."

Maryl snatched the note out of Janelle's hand. "I'm sorry you find me so difficult to be around." She put the Toyota in gear and drove home with bleary eyes and a timorous heart.

By the time she got home, she was on the edge of the first panic attack of her life. She locked her doors, pulled the shades and disconnected the phone before crawling into bed with the shakes. Rupert lay on the floor next to the bed and whined in confusion. Maryl's mind raced in denial and her panic escalated into tears. She wept until she felt sick and staggered into the bathroom to throw up. Brushing her teeth afterwards, her anger began to rise. When it was strong enough to

protect her, she plugged her phone in and called Robin's number.

"Hello."

Maryl almost caved when she heard Robin's husky voice. "What do you think you're doing? You promised it would be over."

"I never promised," Robin said in a quiet voice.

Maryl knew this was true and it just made her angrier. "I asked you not to come here. We talked about this and it will never work."

"Why not?"

"Because! We don't know anything about each other! What happened between us was a illusion-an aberration!"

"I don't believe that and I don't think you do either."

Robin's utter calm was infuriating. "You said you would be my memory and now you've ruined it for me! How can I ever trust you again? You should never have come here!" Maryl was shaking with rage.

"I had to come," Robin said simply.

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

Maryl couldn't frame a coherent reply so she slammed the phone down. It wasn't satisfying enough so she slammed it again. Not being in the best frame of mind to make decisions, Maryl allowed herself to have a fit.

Her phone was obviously broken by the time she felt better and Rupert was fussing at the back door to be let out. Unplugging the phone from the wall, she carried it into the kitchen and dropped it in the trash before letting Rupert out into the back yard. She sat down at the kitchen table with a beer and tried to sort out her conflicting emotions.

The temptation to find Robin and go to her was central in her heart. But what to do then was uncertain. She could try to convince her to go home to her family. She could fall into her arms and let fate determine their destiny. She had a completely irrational urge to grab Robin by the ears and shake some sense into her. Or she could ignore Robin entirely and perhaps in time she would realize the mistake she had made and leave.

Unable to come to a decision and feeling a little drained by the emotions of the past few hours, Maryl took Rupert for a short run and watched the news before going to bed. She lay in the dark

for hours, her eyes wide open and couldn't get rid of the knowledge that Robin was within just a few miles and would be happy to see her. Or would have been if Maryl hadn't yelled at her and hung up on her. She wished she could take that conversation back, but she didn't know how she could have done it differently. She had counted on never seeing her again and now she was here.

It was almost three in the morning when she started digging around in her closet for her old phone. Hoping it would work, she plugged it into the outlet under the bed and lifted the handset. Hearing a dial tone, she sat on the floor and punched in the number she had inadvertently memorized.

Robin's voice was sleepy. "Hello?"

Maryl felt small and vulnerable. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"I had it coming."

"And I shouldn't have hung up on you. I don't usually act like that."

"Let's just forget that call ever happened, okay?"

Maryl nodded as new tears fell. "I've seen you a couple of times this last week. I thought I was going crazy."

"I'm sorry, Maryl. I tried to keep a low profile so you wouldn't see me by accident, but I had no idea where and when you were likely to be so every time I went out was a gamble. Listen, I know this wasn't what you wanted. I've been selfish in going after what I want, but I want you to know that I don't have any expectations. I have hopes, but no expectations. I'm here and I'm not going away, but I'm not going to stalk you. You can talk to me or not talk to me-it's up to you."

"I don't know what I want."

"I know you'll need time to work it out. I'm prepared to be as patient as you need me to be. Just because I'm here doesn't mean you have to decide anything right away. I'm willing to let you set the pace."

"You mean until I come to my senses?"

Robin chuckled softly. "Something like that. At some point, you'll realize that I really do love you and that I want to love you for the rest of your life. Whether that takes weeks or months is up to you. But however long it turns out to be, I'll be here."

"How can you be so certain I'm the one for you?"

"Because I woke up next to love."

Maryl remembered how long it had taken to arrange the stones on the beach. She had had to

work so quietly, afraid that Robin would wake and catch her.

"I know that you love me, Maryl, and I know that you're afraid to trust my love for you, but if you'll give me a chance, I'll prove it to you."

It was all becoming too much and Maryl knew if she didn't hang up soon she would start blubbering. "I should let you get back to bed. I only called to apologize."

"Okay. Get some sleep, Maryl. Call me whenever you need to talk, even if it's only about the weather."

"Good night, Robin."

~***~

When she woke, Janelle was lying on the other side of the bed watching her. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry I was such a jerk yesterday, but you've been behaving irrationally."

Maryl rolled to her back and stretched. "I'm probably not done."

"Thanks for the warning. Did you call her?"

Maryl stared at her ceiling and remembered. "Yes. What time is it?"

"A little after eleven. What did she say?"

"Can this conversation wait until I've had some coffee?"

Janelle sat up and crossed her legs. "I made some about an hour ago. By the way, what happened to your phone?"

"Long story," Maryl said as she threw the covers back and sat up. "My old phone is hooked up. It's under the edge of the bed." She stuck her feet in worn slippers and padded into the kitchen. Rupert had his nose pointed at the back door and she apologized to him before letting him out. The coffee was just as she liked it and she carried a steaming cup back to the bedroom. "You could have let Rupert out."

"He didn't ask me."

"I don't recall asking *you* in."

"You would have," Janelle said lightly, "but you were still asleep."

Maryl propped her pillows against the headboard and leaned back against it. She held her coffee

with both hands and blew on it while considering what to say. She knew that Janelle was all but frothing at the mouth with anticipation and the idea of messing with her head before answering questions was too tempting to pass up. "You've been spending quite a bit of time in my bed recently. Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"Oh, *please*," Janelle grimaced. "To start with, you don't have the right equipment..."

"I know where to buy it," Maryl interrupted.

Janelle blushed. "Can you buy a hairy chest, too?"

Maryl grinned. "Probably not, but I know a woman who..."

Janelle held her hands up in horrified protest. "I'd rather not know. If you're not going to tell me about Robin, I'm leaving. What did you talk about?"

Maryl sipped her coffee before speaking. "She loves me; she's not going to stalk me and she'll be patient."

"That's it?" Janelle spread her hands apart. "Where is she working? Where does she live? How long has she been here? Does she like dogs?"

"We didn't talk about any of that."

Janelle rolled her eyes. "Well, when are you going to see her?"

Maryl shrugged.

"You must know that it's inevitable," Janelle pointed out. "You've already seen her a couple of times and you didn't even know she was here. This isn't that big a city and you're going to run into her whether you like it or not. If it's accidental, you'll be taken off guard and she'll be in control while you blubber and blush. Is that what you want?"

"It's not about being in control," Maryl objected.

"Oh, yes, it is," Janelle said firmly. "Not of her, but of yourself. One of the things I've always admired about you is how persistently you pursue relationships. No matter what happens, you keep putting yourself out there in search of The One. Since you came home from the camping trip, you've changed. You stopped looking. It's like you found the one you want and no one else will do, but you refuse to go after her. Maybe you had a good excuse when she lived in Breining, but she's here now. Changing your whole life to be near someone is pretty serious. Don't you think?"

Maryl swung her legs out of bed and headed for the kitchen. "I don't want to think about this right now."

"See?" Janelle said as she followed. "That's so unlike you! You're usually so aggressive about understanding what's going on and now you run away and hide at every opportunity."

Maryl felt almost panicked at the pressure she was under. Her skin itched and she felt like crying and the urge to drive Janelle forcibly from her house was almost unbearable. She refilled her coffee cup and sat down at the table, determined to keep it under wraps.

Janelle pulled out the chair across from her and sat down. "You love her."

"I *loved* her," Maryl corrected.

"You *still* love her; you're just afraid of what that means. Call her."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not ready."

"When will you be ready?"

"Maybe never."

Janelle's hands slammed down on the table. "Goddammit, Maryl! Someone is *begging* you to let her love you and you're acting like she's got the plague! Some of us aren't that lucky and it pisses me off!"

Maryl was momentarily stunned as Janelle burst into tears and ran from the room. In all the time they'd known each other, Maryl could count on one hand the number of times she had seen Janelle cry. The front door slammed and she shook her head before setting her cup on the table. She could hear the El Camino turning over, but as usual, it wouldn't start. Maryl ran outside and opened the car door. "Come back inside, Janelle."

"Why?"

Maryl looked around nervously. "Because I'm in my underwear."

Janelle put her hands together on the steering wheel and rested her forehead on them. "I don't know if Robin is the one for you," she choked, "but if any man ever did for me what she's done for you, I'd be the happiest woman alive."

"Come inside," Maryl repeated. "Come on." Janelle allowed herself to be drawn back into the house and Maryl poured her a cup of coffee before sitting down. Taking a guess, Maryl spoke. "I thought things were going well with Carlos."

Janelle wiped at her eyes. "Yeah, well, I knew things weren't right. I told you that. Remember?"

Maryl nodded. "What happened?"

"He met someone else." Janelle shrugged her shoulders. "He was fun, but I think I knew that it wouldn't go anywhere. It was just a matter of time."

"Still...I'm sorry."

Janelle's hands twisted uncomfortably. "I need you to see her."

"Why?" She asked in genuine confusion.

"Because you give me courage. The way you keep searching for the right woman gives me hope."

Maryl was almost speechless in surprise. "Hope?"

"I know I give you a hard time about The One. But it's only a cover so you won't know how lonely I am."

Maryl thought her heart might break for her friend. "Oh, Janelle..."

"I *want* you to succeed. I want you to find The One because when you do, it means that I can believe that there's a man out there who will love me back. I *need* to believe it. So when I see you pushing someone away, it makes me feel lost and hopeless. I'm not telling you to marry her- I'm saying that you should talk to her. Find out if she's The One for you. If she's not, then you can move on. But, I think that in your heart you know that she *is* The One. You've been searching for her all your life and now that she's here, you don't know what to do. It was different on the camping trip because you knew when it would be over. You could surrender your heart because you knew what would happen. Now you don't have that security."

Tears formed in Maryl's eyes at the accuracy of Janelle's words. "I'm scared that if I get to know her again I'll find out it was just an infatuation. I need to believe that it was love and that it *could* have lasted if things had been different."

"I understand what you're saying," Janelle said softly, "but things *are* different now. If she is The One, you can't let her go. She might be the only chance you ever have at a long term relationship."

"I don't know if I'm capable of having a long term relationship."

Janelle gripped her hand. "The truth is, you suck at short term relationships."

Maryl blinked.

"You do," Janelle insisted. "They all end in disaster. Maybe it's time to try something new."

What's her track record?"

"I only know bits and pieces."

"Well?" Janelle urged.

"A one night stand and a twelve year relationship."

"Okay." Janelle seemed to perk up. "By moving here she's proved that your affair wasn't a one night stand. She wants more. She's had a long-term relationship and apparently she sees something in you that makes her think that it could work between the two of you. Go talk to her about it. Find out what she knows. Find out what she wants. It doesn't mean you have to fall into line with her plans."

Maryl took a deep breath and held it. If she hadn't wanted to see Robin, it would have been easy to say no. She was still afraid, but knowing that it really was inevitable made it a relief to acquiesce. "Okay."

Janelle slumped and put her head on the table. "Jeez, Maryl. You can be so stubborn that when you finally move it leaves me in need of medical attention."

Maryl considered her options. Her fear now was that she would immediately fall into Robin's arms and it would all unravel before she had the sense to figure out how she felt. Using her past as a guide how *not* to approach her, she tried to think how to make everything different. It seemed logical that if she wanted the relationship to be different from what she was used to, *she* would have to be different.

The sensible first step would be to meet her in a place that discouraged intimacy. Someplace casual and public, but comfortable. Rupert should come, too. They had never talked about pets and she needed to know up front if Robin had a problem with dogs. It occurred to her that she needed a second opinion of Robin-someone who could help her keep things in perspective. Janelle would be perfect for that.

Maryl existed inside of her anticipation. Now that she had decided, she was anxious to make things happen. "You have to come with me."

Janelle's head popped up and a grin formed. "I thought I would have to beg."

"I need someone to keep me grounded."

"You need a chaperone," Janelle teased.

"True," Maryl admitted. "But I also need a second opinion."

"You've got it. Can we call her now?"

Janelle followed her into the bedroom and paced as Maryl lifted the phone onto the bed. Her heart was in her throat and her hands started to shake. She closed her eyes in an effort to regain control of her emotions.

"Just do it," Janelle encouraged her. "It won't get easier, so do it fast. Don't think about it. It's just like ripping off a bandage."

Maryl lifted the handset and pushed redial. She felt faint as it rang. There was a hitch in the fourth ring and the tone changed. It rang twice more and she prepared to hang up when Robin's voice came on the line.

"Hello, Maryl."

She blinked in surprise. "How...How did you know it was me?"

"Caller ID. Can you hang on for a second?"

She nodded, knowing Robin couldn't see her, but unable to speak coherently. She looked up to see Janelle shifting her weight excitedly from side to side. The hope in her face was vivid and made Maryl her own nervousness ease. "I'm on hold," she explained.

"No, you're not," Robin's voice said softly in her ear. "I'm trying to get some privacy."

Maryl looked down at her bedspread and picked at a loose string. "Where are you?"

"Larry's Food Mart. In the produce section."

"I shop there," Maryl said for lack of anything better to say.

"Really? Can I ask why? As opposed to the other supermarkets in town, I mean."

Maryl was a little at odds at the direction the conversation was taking, but she did her best to answer honestly. "Mostly because it's closest to where I live, but it also has the best meat section and the prices are competitive."

"Have you ever noticed that the produce section doesn't smell like produce?"

She had to think about it, but she realized that Robin was right. "Why is that?"

"Nothing is vine ripened. They pick it green and use gases to make it look ripe, but the texture is still green. Okay. I'm alone." A smile entered her voice. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. Did you get any sleep?"

Maryl tried to ignore Janelle's curiosity. "Yeah. I just got up. Um...I was wondering if...maybe we could...meet somewhere. Just for a little bit." She felt like an inexperienced teenager asking for a dance and it made her blush. "If you have time..."

"Of course I have time," Robin said gently. "Where?"

"The park?"

"Which one?"

"Riverside. It's at the foot of Seventh Street."

"What time?"

Maryl looked up at her friend. "Two o'clock?" Janelle nodded vigorously.

"Sounds good. What are you going to wear?"

"Huh?"

"Should I be casual or dressy-butch or femme? Do you have a preference?"

Maryl was at a loss and it suddenly reminded her that she had to figure out what *she* was going to wear. "What are you wearing now?"

"Sort of casually professional."

"That sounds fine."

"Okay. See you soon."

Maryl nodded and hung up.

"Tell," Janelle demanded.

Maryl covered her mouth and tried to steady her heart rate. "What am I going to wear?"

Janelle bounced over to her closet. "Why don't you take a shower and I'll pick something out for you."

Part Four

"Are you sure about this?"

Janelle elbowed her. "You look sexy. Can you see her?"

Maryl had picked a bench in the middle of the park, their backs to the river so she could see Robin as soon as she arrived. She wasn't happy with the old, faded blue jeans Janelle had insisted she wear though they *were* extremely comfortable. A white angora sweater and sneakers completed the outfit, but she felt like she was wearing hand-me-downs. Rupert's leash was wrapped in one fist and he lay under the bench waiting for her to drop it so he could go chase ducks.

"She's going to think I don't have any nice clothes," Maryl whined.

"Trust me," Janelle said absently. "I would kill to have your ass and those jeans set it off perfectly."

"You stare at my ass?"

"I don't *stare* at it. I just notice it."

Maryl was very nervous and any distraction was a good one. "It's noticeable? Why didn't you ever tell me? All this time I've been walking around with a huge ass and you never said anything?"

Janelle sighed in frustration. "It's not huge, Maryl. Calm down. It's just perfect. *That's* why it's noticeable."

Maryl loved giving Janelle a hard time. That it was so easy to do took away none of her enjoyment in it. "What about my breasts? Are they noticeable, too?"

"They're fine."

"Fine? This is just great. My ass is too big and my tits are too small and my best friend of *seven years* doesn't bother to tell me until it's too late to do anything about it."

Janelle looked like she was going to bite. "You lesbians are all the same. Trying to ensnare innocent women with your filthy homosexual ways."

"Hey," Maryl laughed. "You're the one who started talking about my ass. And since when do you claim to be innocent?"

"I wasn't talking about me." Janelle pointed past her. "Is that her?"

Maryl's heart thumped wildly until she saw it was a false alarm. "No. And don't point. Didn't your mother teach you any manners at all? I'll tell you when I see her."

When the moment came, however, she watched her walk halfway across the park before she

admitted it was Robin. In her heart, she knew it was Robin immediately, but her brain just wouldn't admit the truth. She was wearing pressed gray slacks and a white blouse with a dark blue blazer and she looked elegant and self-assured. Maryl felt like a bum in her jeans.

"Is that her?" Janelle asked in a hushed voice. "Wow."

Maryl's emotions tangled themselves into an indecipherable mess. Speech was completely beyond her. All she could see was Robin's smile. Even talking to her on the phone had not prepared her for the power of her feelings. She had never quite believed that she was here, but the proof was standing in front of her and she was helpless.

Rupert seemed to sense that something was happening and came out from under the bench to investigate. Maryl watched as Robin reached down to him in slow motion and let him smell her hand. Golden brown eyes came up and drilled into her.

"Hi, Maryl."

The voice, the eyes, the clothes, the impossibility of it all made Maryl feel like she was going to faint. Even Janelle's elbow in her ribs had no effect.

Janelle snorted at her and took over. "My name is Janelle. I'm her best friend."

Maryl watched as they shook hands.

"Robin. And who is this?" She crouched and let Rupert lick her face.

"His name is Rupert," Janelle said with a worried glance at Maryl. "He's Maryl's dog. Do you like dogs?"

"Yes, I do," she crooned to Rupert, her hands buried in his thick fur. "Aren't you a handsome lad? Have you been taking good care of your mom? You have? What a good little prince you are." She stood up and smiled at Maryl before turning her attention to Janelle. "Are you here to protect her? Just curious? Maybe to give a second opinion?"

"All of the above," Janelle grinned.

"Maybe we should get something to eat and you can grill me about my intentions. Maryl looks like she could use a drink and I'm leaning in that direction myself. Is there an outdoor place that will allow Rupert?"

"There's a good Mexican place around the corner. What do you think, Maryl?"

Maryl nodded dumbly and stood up when prompted. She knew she was behaving badly, but she was so numb she was almost paralyzed. Robin walked to her side and a little forward and as they left the park Maryl reached forward without thinking about it and took the so familiar hand in her own. The world stopped spinning when Robin squeezed her fingers and she began to feel more

normal. Janelle was grinning at her and Maryl stuck her tongue out.

They had no trouble getting a table on the veranda. Late October tended to be rather cold and no one else was willing to brave the elements. Rupert was more than happy to lie under the table where he was most likely to receive treats. The waitress brought a round of beer and took their orders before Janelle started in.

"So what *are* your intentions?"

Robin leaned forward on her elbows and answered seriously. "I know it may seem obsessive and impulsive for me to say this considering I've only known Maryl for a few days, but if she'll have me, I intend to make a home with her. I want to spend the rest of our lives together."

Janelle stopped with a beer halfway to her mouth. "Just like that?"

Robin chuckled and pushed a piece of lime into the mouth of her beer bottle. "Nothing is ever that easy-I know that. Maryl seems to have a great deal more sense than I do at this point. I'm perfectly willing to dive right in, but I know that's irrational. I know we need to learn more about each other. I came here because I can't live without knowing if my feelings for her are real. I mean, I know they're real, but I feel in my gut that Maryl is the woman I want to marry and make a life with. I can't walk away from that without knowing. I moved here to give us a chance to find out if it's possible."

In some distant corner of her awareness, it bothered Maryl that she was being talked about as if she weren't there, but it also gave her an opportunity to just soak in Robin's words: to hear what she was thinking and feeling without having to express her own tangled emotions. Her hand still tingled from holding Robin's and she calmly studied her body's desire to crawl into Robin's arms. She knew it would be exciting and safe and perfect, but she held back.

Janelle took a chip from the bowl in the middle of the table and scooped up salsa. "What took you so long? It's been what-two months?" She popped the chip in her mouth.

"Eight weeks exactly," Robin said with a meaningful look at Maryl. "I've been very busy. I had to quit one job and find another. I didn't have a lot of furniture to move, but finding a place to live and moving what I do have took some coordination. I've been easing into my job and buying furniture and kitchen stuff...It's been crazy. I wanted to be settled before I contacted you. I didn't want to blow into town without being prepared to stay. I couldn't just knock on your door and expect you to take me in. You asked me not to come here and I let you believe I wouldn't, so I feel a bit like I broke my word."

Janelle spoke before Maryl could and Robin shifted her gaze. "Where do you live?"

"On Spruce, between Jasper and Granite, in a little two bedroom place."

"And where are you working?"

Robin sat back with a proud smile. "I'm the new manager at Larry's Food Mart."

Maryl's smile sneaked up on her and burst out with a laugh. "No way."

"It's true," Robin said with pleasure. "Getting here was time-consuming, but everything seemed to go exactly in my favor. When I gave notice at my old job and told my boss where I was moving, he just happened to know the owner of Larry's-he's not named Larry, by the way-and that he was looking for a new manager. He put in a good word for me and here I am. My new assistant knew about a rental and just like that I had a place to live. The universe has been nothing but helpful in getting me here."

"How did you find me?" Maryl asked.

"I spent the better part of a week calling doctor's offices. You said a medical group, but I wasn't sure if it was a group or just a couple of doctors sharing space, so I called everyone asking for you until I heard your voice. I parked at the hospital and hid in a bush to see if it was really you. You were wearing a black skirt and a blouse with bright flowers on it-you looked really great, by the way-and I saw which car was yours. I was so happy and relieved I sat there and cried."

"Why didn't you just come in and say hello?"

"I didn't know if you would want to see me and I didn't think it was appropriate to surprise you at work."

"You could have come by my house."

"I don't know where you live. I still don't know your last name even. I'm not a stalker, Maryl. I left you the note because I wanted you to be in charge of what happened next."

The waitress came back with their food and the conversation halted while they sorted everything out and got another round of beer. Maryl couldn't remember drinking hers, but the bottle was empty. She resolved to pay more attention-not just to Robin, but to herself. "What about your family?" She asked with concern. "Do they hate me now?"

Robin laughed. "On the contrary. They call me everyday to find out if I've seen you and give me advice on what to do next."

"But...?"

"They'll always be my family, Maryl. We'll always be close regardless of where I live. Besides, if you stick to the freeway, it's only a 3-½ hour drive. They're looking at it as having a new place to spend the weekends. Julian and his brood came down last weekend and Mom wants to come sometime next month. They're *fine* with this. They want me to be happy and they really liked you."

Robin seemed completely confident in regards to her family and Maryl nodded her acceptance. Janelle cleared her throat.

"What do you like to do for fun?"

Robin poured hot sauce on her food liberally. "I ride a bike to stay in shape and I like to play golf now and then. I like dancing and dinner parties. I'm quite good at Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune, but I don't always get to watch them. I read when I have time. I'm thinking about taking a pottery class that starts next month at the high school. I like working with my hands." Robin shrugged. "What do you like to do, Janelle?"

Maryl watched Robin eat while Janelle rattled on about her life. Robin glanced at her now and then with a small smile meant just for her. Maryl ate absently while she stared and compared how Robin looked now to how she had remembered her. Her hair seemed longer, especially around her face and her eyes were even more golden than she remembered. She studied Robin's hands, the feel of them on her skin somehow more than a memory. It all became a bit overwhelming.

"Excuse me." Maryl got up and quickly made her way to the restroom. She splashed cold water on her face, but it didn't help at all. Neither did deep, even breathing. Part of her wanted to hide in the restroom until someone came looking for her, but she hated being so dramatic. She forced herself into a semblance of calm and went back to the table.

She sat down just as Robin asked Janelle, "Do you like kids?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

"I mean... Would you date a man with a kid?"

"I have. It usually doesn't work out." Janelle waved her fork around airily. "If they live with the mother they hate me. It's like they think it's my fault that their parents have split up. If they live with the father, he seems to think it's my duty to mother them. It irritates the hell out of me when I'm expected to *want* to clean a man's house just because he bought me dinner. I don't like cleaning my *own* house. And most parents are raising the most *awful* children. They seem to think that the more their kids express themselves, the better parents they are. What they can't see is that they encourage their children to behave badly and call it self-expression."

Robin was grinning at Janelle's frustration. "I've got a guy in the meat department with a six-year-old boy you might want to check out. He's a widower. I don't really know too much about him and he's not the most attractive man in the world, but he's got a ready smile and he's very easy to like. His son is adorable and they're like best friends. I don't think Jerry is the type to dump the responsibility for his son on whomever he's dating. He seems to be having too much fun being a parent for that. You might like him. He's tall and fit and he has red hair. He's off today, but he works tomorrow."

"Thanks, Robin. I'll go check him out."

There was a moment of silence that threatened to become uncomfortable and Janelle took

advantage of it to make her own trip to the restroom. Maryl watched her go, knowing that Robin was looking at her and suddenly afraid of being alone with her.

"Are you all right?"

Maryl reluctantly met Robin's eyes. "I don't know. I can't decide if you're a dream come true or a nightmare in the making."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not hurting me. I just don't know what to do. This wasn't what I expected."

Robin nodded. "I know. I've been told I have a tendency to be reckless and impulsive. Some people find it irritating, but it's actually one of the things I like about myself." She put an elbow on the table and leaned her chin on her hand. "You know what I miss most?"

Maryl shook her head.

"I miss talking. It was all wonderful, but I miss talking with you. With most people I wait for my chance to talk, but with you I was just as happy to listen. I miss that."

Maryl reached out and took Robin's hand from her chin. "I missed you, too."

Robin's eyes were like lasers. "I had myself convinced that you couldn't possibly be as lovely as my memories, but you are. And it's not just because I love you. You *are* beautiful."

"My God," Maryl breathed dizzily. "It would be so easy to surrender to you. I could slide into your arms and it would be months before I could form a coherent thought. Do you have any idea how tempting that is?"

Robin laced their fingers together. "I know *exactly* how tempting it is, but I won't be satisfied with a few months, Maryl. I won't be happy with anything but the rest of our lives."

"How can you be so sure that I'm the one for you?"

"I just am."

Maryl could see in Robin's expression that she really did love her. There was an element of passion in her eyes, but her gaze was different from any other woman who had ever looked at her before. There was a calm certainty in her face and bearing that made her wholly believable. It was almost enough to convince Maryl that she should feel the same way. She kept her fingers entwined with Robin's, but leaned back and closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she put reins on her feelings and pulled them back. "It scares me that you changed your whole life for me." She opened her eyes to see a vague smile on Robin's lips.

"I didn't change my life. You did. I only shifted some of the details."

Before Maryl could say more, Janelle returned.

"Halloween is next week," Robin said to the both of them. "The store is hosting a booth in the craft fair at the fairgrounds. It would be great if you could drop by."

"We still have to work that day," Janelle said with a pleased look at their clasped hands. "Maybe we could stop by at lunch?"

Maryl nodded and forced a smile.

Robin squeezed her fingers before letting go. "I should get back to work." She reached into her blazer and pulled out a checkbook. She took out a fifty-dollar bill and dropped it on the table. "Lunch is on me this time." She pushed her chair back and patted her legs to encourage Rupert to put his feet up.

Maryl watched as Robin buried her hands in Rupert's ruff and whispered into his ear. She could feel his tail wagging against her knees and smiled at his eagerness. Robin stopped whispering and when she looked over at Maryl, Rupert did, too. Maryl laughed and wondered what the secret was. "What did you tell him?"

Robin merely chuckled and fed Rupert a bite of her lunch. She stood up and reached a hand out to Janelle. "It was really nice to meet you. Don't forget to have a look at Jerry."

"I won't. Thanks for lunch."

Maryl fought the urge to ask her to stay, but when Robin's hand settled briefly on her shoulder, she looked up into the golden eyes. "Call me."

Robin hesitated. "Are you sure?"

Maryl nodded and Robin's smile made her skin prickle. She watched her walk away with her long, casual stride and put a hand to her heart to ease the pain of longing she felt. "What am I going to do?"

"I like her," Janelle said simply.

Maryl reached for her beer. "Don't start nagging me," she warned.

"I won't, but you did bring me at least in part for a second opinion. So here it is. I like her and she's not just some silly twit who only has the hots for you. She's a grown-up. This is the kind of woman who you can make a life with. I can see why you're so scared. You'll have to be the best you can be with her because that's what she'll give to you. Of all the women you've been with, I respect this one the most and that's all I'm going to say about her."

Maryl gave a dry chuckle. "Right. You'll be nagging me in no time."

"We'll see."

~***~

Maryl was sitting on her bed Sunday evening with the stereo on low as she painted her toenails. She let the phone ring four times before answering it. "Hello."

"Hi," Robin said. Maryl could hear the smile in it. "What are you doing?"

"Painting my toenails."

"Hmm. What color?"

"Twenty-dollar-a-pop-prostitute-red." Maryl's ear burned deliciously with Robin's laughter.

"What are *you* doing?"

"Thinking about all of the things I didn't ask you."

Maryl held the phone between her ear and her shoulder and propped her chin on her knee while she went back to polishing. "Such as?"

"Are you seeing anyone?"

Maryl smiled. "A couple of women asked me out, but I turned them down."

"How come?"

Maryl opened her mouth to say something clever, but the truth came out. "They weren't you." The line was so quiet that she began to wonder if they had been disconnected. "I didn't intend to say that."

"Is it true?"

"Yes," Maryl admitted. "What else did you want to ask me?"

"Are you mad at me for moving here?"

"Not exactly."

"Do you want me to leave?"

Maryl's fingers stilled and she considered it. Having Robin near was wrenching, but the idea of having her go away was even more devastating. "No."

Robin's sigh was clear over the open line. "What a relief!"

"Would you have gone if I asked you to?" Maryl held her breath while waiting for the answer.

"I don't know. I'd like to be able to say that I'd do anything you asked, but my career would be in the toilet if I tried to back out now. Whether I'm with you or not, I have to make a living."

Maryl was secretly pleased with this answer. More than once her lovers had quit their jobs in the mistaken belief that she would take care of them.

"Is there anyone I should ask for permission to court you?"

Maryl chuckled. "That sounds a little old fashioned, Robin."

"Perhaps."

Brushing her hair back over her shoulders, Maryl capped the polish and set it aside. "So. You want to court me. What exactly are you asking for?"

"Well, I'm not sure if I can ask you out or give you flowers. I don't want to push you, but I don't want to sit back and let you think that I'm not interested either."

"You need parameters, then?"

"Yes, please."

Maryl stretched her feet out to let her toes dry and lay back on the bed. "Okay, let's see. Work is work. I can't do my job if you're always calling me there. It'll mess with my concentration and probably get me in trouble. You can call me there if it's unavoidable-if you'll be late, for instance-but not to chit chat."

"Agreed. But my job is a little different. First, I'm the boss so I won't get in trouble. I'm working long, odd hours right now so you can call me whenever. I have call-forwarding. If I can't talk I'll turn off my cell phone and you can leave a message."

"Good. I guess the next issue is money. I don't want you trying to buy me with gifts. I know you probably make a lot more than I do, so don't rub it in."

Robin was quiet for a moment. "I promise not to go overboard, but if I want to spend money on you, I will."

Maryl knew there wasn't much she could do to stop her if she was determined, but she had to bite her tongue to keep from arguing just on general principles. "What do you consider overboard?"

"We're not counting date money, are we?"

"I guess not," Maryl conceded. "But I think the one who invites should pay."

"Deal. I suppose I could limit any other spending to not more than \$100 a week."

Maryl gasped. "A hundred dollars? Whoa! Let's try twenty."

"You can't even get a dozen long-stemmed roses for that," Robin objected. "Fifty."

"I don't like roses," Maryl said stubbornly. "Twenty-five."

"Thirty-five. That's only five dollars a day."

Maryl punched her pillow in exasperation. "That's \$150 a month, Robin. It's too much."

"Thirty. And I get to roll over what I don't spend each week."

"Twenty-five and you can roll it around all you want."

"Fine," Robin grunted. "But we get to renegotiate in December."

Maryl knew what Robin was thinking and she just had to give her a hard time. "January. Christmas will be a separate negotiation-if we're still speaking."

"I can live with that. If you ever want a job as a buyer, just let me know. You're tough."

"Only when I have to be," Maryl smiled. "Do you need any more rules?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Maryl wanted to scream *yes*. "You haven't even asked me out yet."

"Are your toenails dry?"

Maryl laughed. "Nice try, Robin."

"Okay. Next Sunday the Chamber of Commerce is having a fundraiser. They only sold a total of 100 tickets. It's semi-formal and they're holding it in the showroom of the Ford dealership out by the highway. My predecessor bought two tickets and I've inherited them. There'll be food and wine and after dinner they're raffling off donations from local businesses. As near as I can tell there's a better than even chance that one of us could win something. But before you consider it, I need you to understand that as pleasurable as it would be to spend some time with you, it's also an important business opportunity for the store. I need to start making contacts and arranging mutual favors with other business leaders. Part of why I'll be there is to mingle and introduce myself. If you don't want to go, I'll ask my assistant, but I'd rather share it with you."

Maryl wasn't sure what to say. She had grown up trying to live up to the expectations of her father's social and political maneuvering. Her childhood was still a sore spot for her and she

hadn't considered that being with Robin would entail living on the periphery of that life. On the other hand; that Robin was willing to turn her first such event in Edgewater into her own personal coming out intimated that she would be nothing like Maryl's father. "Are you sure coming out so soon is in your best interest?"

"It's not about coming out," Robin said. "Besides, we won't be the only lesbians there. The county librarian is going to be there with her girlfriend."

"I know Maureen and Shine. How do you know them?"

"I don't. I heard about them through the grapevine."

"If it's not about coming out, then why?"

Robin sighed. "See now, it's just not fair that I always have to explain my fantasies to you. At some point you just have to let me arrange things so I can live them out without having to negotiate them first."

Maryl was completely confused. "What fantasy? What are you talking about?"

"I want to see you in a dress," Robin admitted with just a touch of chagrin. "I want to be so distracted at having you on my arm that I can't remember my name. I want to see the envy on their faces and know that if I'm lucky and treat you right that you might kiss me afterwards."

Maryl remembered how Robin had similarly disarmed her on the river over the bathing products and her skin seemed to dissolve from the inside out. "Well, since you put it that way..."

"How do you always know when I've got something in mind?"

"I don't. You just cave too easy. I think you *like* letting me know that you're fantasizing about me. Do I get to tell you what to wear?"

"When you ask me out, I'll wear anything you want."

"Promise?"

"My word of honor."

~***~

Maryl's hands were steady, but her stomach was in chaos. Robin would be arriving soon and her nerves were in complete disarray. She tried to ignore her unease and concentrated on the cosmetic highlights she was applying to her face. Satisfied with the results, she checked her dress in the full-length mirror behind the bathroom door.

Maryl had chosen a midnight blue cocktail dress that left most of her back bare; counting on her hair to keep her suitably modest. She enjoyed dressing up like this, but she usually only had to

worry about pleasing her date. Tonight, *Robin* would be judged by how she looked and acted. This was what had her in turmoil.

Until she had moved away from her family, all of Maryl's life had been a reflection on the people around her. She had felt that it was her job as a child to make her parents look good and she couldn't shake the feeling that Robin expected it of her, too. Resentment found a home in her temperament and she hung onto it as a way to protect her heart.

Tossing a coat over a chair next to the front door, Maryl went to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee. She and Robin had enjoyed several long midnight talks during the week. But, best of all had been seeing her at the store's free pumpkin painting booth at the fairgrounds on Halloween. Robin had been dressed as a scarecrow and Maryl had worn her high school cheerleading outfit. Aside from being taller now than she had been as a teenager, it had fit very well and Robin had offered to find a football uniform if she ever wanted to make out behind the bleachers. The pumpkin she had painted that day, as well as the cheerful bouquet of flowers she had received at work the day before Halloween sat together on her dining table and she studied them fondly while she waited.

The doorbell brought a flutter of nerves and she put her cup in the sink before going to the front door. She looked through the peephole and saw Robin dressed in dark slacks, a creamy satin blouse and a classy brown leather jacket. Maryl couldn't remember if she had ever seen a woman look so aggressively butch and suggestively femme at the same time. Taking a deep breath, she shook her hair back and opened the door.

Robin's eyes opened wide as they looked her over. "Holy cow," she said reverently.

Maryl blushed with guilty pleasure. "Was this what you had in mind?"

"No," Robin blurted. "I *hoped*, but this...? You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Maryl's doubt and resentment about the night ahead flared up. "Good. I didn't want to make you look bad in front of the people at the fundraiser." The tone of her voice didn't come out as casual as she had hoped and Robin's head pulled back. She felt petty now and spoke quickly to try to take some of the sting out of her words. "You look incredible. Very sexy."

"I'm glad you think so," Robin said ambiguously. "I'm not too butch?"

"No," Maryl said softly. "You look just right." She handed her coat to Robin and eased her arms into it. With a final pat on Rupert's head she locked the door and let Robin hand her into the car. She stared quietly out the window as Robin drove, completely comfortable with her driving skills.

"Are you okay?" Robin asked into the silence.

"Sure," Maryl nodded.

Robin glanced at her uncertainly. "Would you tell me if you weren't? Because I kind of get the feeling that something's not right."

Maryl shook her head with a forced smile and stared back out the window. "I'm fine." Several blocks passed and Robin suddenly pulled into a parking lot and shut off the engine. "What...?"

"Tell me what's wrong."

Maryl sighed in frustration and pushed her hair behind one ear. She just wanted to get there, get it over with and get on with her life. She didn't want to talk about it because she suspected she was being silly. Plus, she knew that once she got there she would probably enjoy herself whether she intended to or not. "Nothing's wrong, Robin."

"Are you worried what those people will think of you? Trust me when I tell you that you've got nothing to worry about."

"That's not it..."

"So it *is* something," Robin said. "I can tell by looking at your face that you aren't happy, Maryl."

"You can not," Maryl objected.

"Can so. You might as well tell me now because I intend to stay here until you do."

Maryl stubbornly set her jaw and stared into Robin's eyes. Several minutes passed in silence and she began to think that Robin would never bend. With a slow, deep breath, Maryl gave up. "I grew up as an ornament on the family tree. I don't want to be your ornament, too."

Robin's mouth fell open and her shoulders slumped.

"I know I'm probably being stupid," Maryl continued. "It's just a fundraiser, but I worked hard to get away from the kind of life where I had to be concerned about living up to the expectations of strangers and people I don't respect. If a life with you means that I have to be the proper, politically correct wife at endless social functions, then I need to know now."

Robin looked horrified. "You think I want you to be a...a decoration to make myself look good?"

"Don't you?"

Robin buried her face in her hands with a groan. "No. How could I have made such a mess of things?" She turned in her seat so she could face Maryl. "I wanted to impress you with the kind of life I could offer you. I didn't want you to think being with me would be a life on the edge of obscurity. I know you grew up in the Country Club set. Well, I grew up in the Bowling Alley set and I was afraid that you would be disappointed. I only wanted to show you that we could have whatever kind of life you want. Being with me doesn't necessarily mean you would be settling

for less than you're used to."

Maryl's resentment began to thaw. "You're right. I had the Country Club life. I hated it and I hated the people who made me live it. I looked at the Bowling Alley set with envy. Important people just make me mad because they can't see value beyond their own tightly protected egos. I thought you invited me so that you could use me to impress those people. I know that sounds vain on my part, but..."

"You *will* impress them," Robin interrupted, "but that's not why I asked you to go with me. I don't care if they're impressed or not. All I care about is getting to spend time with you and I thought that this was something that you would enjoy doing. In fact, we don't have to go. We can do anything you want. Just let me spend some time with you. Please?"

Maryl's doubts disappeared like smoke in a high wind. The car's interior suddenly seemed close and intimate and she was struck once again at how sexy Robin looked. "If someone is obnoxious or stupid, can I say what I really think?"

"Of course you can. Why would you think you couldn't?"

"Do I have to dance with old fat guys?"

"No old fat guys. Or young skinny guys. In fact, no guys at all."

"Can I pig out on the food?"

Robin laughed. "We'll just drag our chairs right up to the buffet and scandalize the whole damn town."

Maryl smiled. "Okay. Let's go."

~***~

Watching Robin as she moved from one introduction to another was fascinating. She didn't wait for people to come to her; she sought them out. Maryl was impressed at her aggressive warmth and how it disarmed people. Robin seemed to think it was obvious she was gay and that everyone already knew. Those who might have objected acted as though it was too late for them to have a problem with it. The first time someone's face expressed displeasure at Robin's introduction of Maryl as her date, Robin had merely said, "When life hands you lemons..." and shrugged as though it were all beyond her control. Several minutes later the older gentleman was acting as though Robin's sexuality was his own idea. Maryl wasn't sure how it had happened, but it was impressive.

At one point Maryl took two glasses of wine from a passing waiter and handed one to Robin. She almost choked on her own when Robin's hand found her bare back and lingered softly along her spine. The arousal on Robin's face was breathtaking and it took all of Maryl's willpower to keep from kissing her. "Don't look at me like that," she whispered.

"Like what?" Robin whispered back.

"Like you're two seconds away from...from making love to me."

"But, I am."

Maryl's breasts were aching to be touched and she couldn't get enough air in her lungs. The temptation to place Robin's hands where she wanted them was almost too much to bear. She looked around the room for a hidden corner in which to at least kiss her, but didn't see one. She did, however, see Maureen and Shine heading straight for them. She didn't know either woman very well, but they had met on several occasions and she was anxious for Robin to meet them.

"There are some women I want you to meet," she whispered to Robin. "But as soon as I find a place for us to be alone, I'm going to kiss you."

Robin's hand slid up under her hair and rubbed her back in soft slow circles. "I'll keep my eyes out for a likely spot."

Hello, Maryl!"

She turned with a smile. "Hi, Shine. Maureen-it's always nice to see you."

"I can't tell you what a relief it is to not be the only gay couple here tonight," Maureen grinned. "Sometimes the only thing that keeps me coming to these events is knowing that it's more distressing for them than it is for me."

Robin laughed and Maryl hugged her arm possessively. "Allow me to introduce my date. This is Robin Griffith. She's the new manager at Larry's Food Mart. Robin, this is Maureen Baird-the County Librarian-and Shine Avery. She's a disc jockey at Magic 95."

Robin shook hands with both women, but lingered at Shine. "If I'm not mistaken, you're the one who voices our commercials."

"I am," Shine admitted.

"I'd like to get together with you sometime and discuss some ideas about an advertising scheme I'm rolling around in my head."

"Good, because I've got to tell you-I'm pretty sick of what we're running now."

Maryl caught Maureen's eye and grinned. Maureen smiled back with understanding and slipped her arm around Shine's waist. "I've been hearing good things about your booth at the Halloween fair," she said to Robin. "Very clever. The children liked it, but the parents-especially the mothers-were very impressed."

Robin's intent gaze belied the grin she wore and Maryl knew she was focused entirely on business. "Really? What are they saying?"

"They know it was an advertising gimmick, but they liked that there was at least one activity available for their children that didn't cost them an arm and a leg. I think you'll find that a lot of them will visit your store just to show their appreciation."

"Excellent," Robin said. "We've been hearing good things at the store as well. I'm working on ideas for Christmas and if that goes well, perhaps we can do something for Easter and the Fourth of July."

Shine spoke up. "Maybe we could do a live remote on the air for the Christmas booth. I'll talk to the General Manager and see what I can arrange."

Robin nodded happily. "That would be great."

Maryl noticed that the buffet line was forming and her stomach growled. The other women looked at her and she grinned. "I'm hungry. What can I say?"

They joined the line as a group and visited while they waited. Filling their plates from the large variety of foods, Shine found a small table where they could sit together. Robin took off her jacket and hung it on her chair before sitting down and Maryl wanted to rub herself all over the satin shirt she wore. Sliding her chair a little closer, she put her hand on Robin's thigh.

Halfway through dinner, the emcee stood up and began talking. Maryl used his distraction to pull Robin's chair a little closer so she could run her hand over the slender shoulders. She could just feel the scar on Robin's back through the thin blouse and she slowly stroked it with her fingers. Ignoring the speech he gave about community activities and goals and the list of businesses that donated the evening's prizes, Maryl focused on the pleasure she felt in just being close to Robin. That she wanted Robin sexually was no longer an idea she fought against. That she loved her was harder to accept, but she knew it was true.

Maryl's primary fear was still that what she felt would turn out to be an illusion or, a few months down the road, Robin would change her mind about her feelings for Maryl. Knowing it wasn't fair to deliberately entice Robin when she didn't intend to follow through, she reluctantly stilled her fingers, then pulled them back to her lap. She tried to smile when Robin looked at her curiously.

Robin half rose from her chair and moved it right next to Maryl. Sitting back down, she put her arm around her shoulders and leaned in to whisper. "Why did you stop?"

Maryl could smell her clean scent. "I don't want to be a tease."

"Even if I enjoy it?" Reaching into her slacks, Robin pulled out their ticket stubs and held them up. "Choose one."

Maryl picked one at random, a little disconcerted at the abrupt change in conversation. "What's this for?"

"They're starting the drawings. If you win something it's yours to keep."

Maureen was the first of their group to win a prize. She came back to the table with a pewter-edged crystal serving platter and seemed very pleased. Maryl could see why. It was a beautiful piece.

Maryl's number was one of the last to be called and she jumped up in excitement. Her prize was in an envelope and as she accepted it, the emcee informed the crowd that she had just won a dawn ride for two in a hot air balloon. Maryl's adrenaline level went through the roof. Thanking everyone on the makeshift stage, she all but skipped back to Robin's side. "Did you hear that? I won a balloon ride! You'll come with me, won't you?"

Robin smiled. "If you want me to."

Maryl hugged her impulsively and sat down. Holding out the envelope, she showed it to Shine and Maureen. "A balloon ride!"

Shine laughed. "You'll love it, but make sure you dress warm. It gets really cold up there. Especially this time of year."

"You've been up in one?"

"Many times," Shine said with a fond smile. "I've even bungee jumped and parachuted out of them."

"I am *not* jumping out of it," Robin said firmly.

Maryl glanced at Robin before explaining to the other women. "She had a bad experience with parachuting as a child."

"Someone took a *child* parachuting?" Maureen asked in horror.

"Not exactly," Robin grimaced.

Maryl sat back and let her hand trail over Robin's thigh as she recounted her adventure for them.

~***~

"I like them," Robin said on the way back to Maryl's house. "If I invite them to have dinner with us sometime, would that be okay with you?"

"Sure." Maryl was just drunk enough to feel good without being at all out of control. Robin had only had one glass of wine early on in the evening so that she could drive and Maryl watched her

capable hands on the steering wheel. She had yet to see a ring on one of those fingers and wondered if Robin ever wore one.

"I'm glad you won something," Robin said into the silence. "Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, I did."

"I didn't ignore you too much?"

Maryl lay her head back against the seat and studied Robin's profile. "Not at all."

"Did I ever make you feel like a trophy?"

"You made me feel beautiful," Maryl said in a soft voice. "When can I kiss you?"

Robin's hands tightened on the steering wheel and she coughed. "I thought I should at least get you home first."

She could see a pulse in Robin's throat and knew from the intensity with which she watched the road that she was scared and excited all at once. For some reason, this made Maryl feel even calmer and more in control. "Pull over, Robin. I don't want to wait that long."

Robin obediently guided the car to the curb and turned off the motor. "I remember the last time we did this," she said with a shaky voice.

Maryl released her seat belt and reached for Robin. "So do I." Their lips met tentatively and she buried a hand in dark hair to hold their mouths together. It seemed only a few moments and they were kissing deeply: lips slipping wetly and tongues delving in a sensuous dance. Desire grabbed Maryl by the throat and shook her roughly. She strained to be closer, but the agony of need in her chest and throat were inescapable and she whimpered into the hungry mouth that was laying claim to her very soul.

They pulled away from each other simultaneously and Maryl could see the desire she felt mirrored in Robin's eyes. "I'm sorry," she blurted out.

"Don't be," Robin gasped. "Don't ever be sorry about this. It's magnificent."

Maryl cautiously put a trembling hand on Robin's arm. "No. I'm just sorry we have to stop."

Robin managed a weak smile. "I'm not. But we should go."

The ache of unrelieved passion only sharpened as Robin drove her home. Her hands were still shaking as she tried to unlock her front door and Robin finally took pity on her and did it for her. With her hands free, Maryl slid a hand underneath the leather jacket and rubbed Robin's back. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Robin left the keys in the door and pulled her in for a hug. "I'm *glad* we still have these feelings for each other," she whispered. "I was terrified that the magic would be gone. Please don't apologize to me."

"I don't want you to hurt."

Robin's hands were in her hair and her breath was tickling Maryl's ear. "It hurts *good*."

The words sounded like a dare to Maryl and she arched into Robin's lean body. Pulling at the back of the satin shirt she slipped her hands inside and ran her hands up the delicate flesh of her back. Robin groaned and captured her mouth for a turbulent kiss, then grasped her hands and forced her to stop.

"Are you okay?" Robin rasped.

Maryl nodded, not at all sure that it was true. Her hands itched to touch Robin and her breasts and groin were throbbing. If not for Robin holding her hands firmly she would have torn someone's clothes off-her own if Robin were uncooperative.

Robin shook her head slowly. "You want me. I can see it. Can you see how much I want you, too?" Maryl nodded again, sure this time. Her hands were pinned at her sides as Robin moved in to kiss her throat. "We could make love tonight, but you would regret it in the morning. I couldn't live with that, Maryl."

She knew that Robin was right and that when her body cooled she would be grateful for her strength in this moment, but the agony of it brought tears to her eyes. "When can I see you again?"

"Whenever you want. Just crook your finger and I'll come running."

Maryl lay her head on Robin's shoulder and willed herself to relax. Her hands were gradually released and she loosely circled them around Robin's waist. Their bodies began to sway and a feeling of utter contentment filled her. "I could do this all night," she murmured.

"What would your neighbors say?"

Maryl had lived in the same house the entire time she had lived in Edgewater. She thought back and couldn't remember a single time she had kissed a woman goodnight on her porch. Aside from the occasional struggle to get the door open, all of the sexual and emotional intimacy she had engaged in had been *inside* the house. It made her sad to think that all her neighbors had ever seen had been the arguing and the heartbreak at the end of her relationships. Recalling the number of women she had allowed inside, she felt like a tramp for the first time in her life. "I've been with a lot of women," she said with shame, "but the neighbors have never seen this before. No one has ever kissed me goodnight and gone home."

Robin's arms tightened. "I don't care how many there were before me," she said with quiet

sincerity. "I only care that I'm the last."

With just those few words, Maryl felt absolved. "Do you mean that?"

"Absolutely. Promise me one thing though? When we're old and gray and we can't make love anymore for fear of breaking a hip, you'll tell me all about them? That way I can feel like I didn't miss anything."

Maryl started to giggle. Grabbing the lapels of Robin's jacket, she held her close for one last sweet kiss before releasing her. "You'd better go now."

Robin bounced down the steps and walked backwards across the lawn with a broad smile, her hands clasped over her heart. "You are more beautiful to me than any jewel. More lovely even than the moon. More dear to my heart than baby bunnies."

"Tell me more," Maryl pleaded dramatically.

Robin flung her arms out. "Your kisses are like water in the desert."

Maryl giggled again. "Hot and gritty?"

"That, too," Robin shrugged expressively, "but I was thinking precious and life giving." She stepped off the curb unawares and fell back against her car without taking her eyes from Maryl. Sidestepping, she backed around the car to the driver's door as she continued. "My heart beats to the rhythm of your name and your touch is like lightning and summer sunlight on my skin."

"You're crazy," Maryl said with immense tenderness.

"Crazy in love with you," Robin said softly. "Sleep well and wake happy, my beloved."

Maryl blew her a kiss as she got into her car and drove away. Cinching her coat against the cold, she opened the door and let Rupert out. Reluctant to let the moment be over, she sat on the top step and gave Rupert kisses for being good. He quickly lost interest in her and began checking the front yard for information and intruders.

Hugging herself to stay warm, Maryl replayed the last fifteen minutes of her life in wonder at the variety of emotions Robin had evoked in her. She had traveled from the edge of orgasm to the brink of despair and languished in complete serenity. How Robin had taken her from such intense sexual fervor through laughter to the calm acceptance she now felt was a mystery in itself. And her delightful parting words were so charming not because of what she had actually said, but that she was willing to risk looking foolish to give Maryl pleasure. She was glad now that they had not made love because sexual satisfaction couldn't compare to the way she felt right at that moment. Calling Rupert from his explorations, Maryl went inside and closed the door.

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Feeling as though she and Janelle had not talked in almost two weeks, she invited her to dinner on Thursday night. True, they worked side by side five days a week, but they hadn't really talked. She wasn't sure if she had been shutting Janelle out or if her best friend had just been giving her some space. Whatever the reason, Maryl intended to change that over spaghetti. She had time to start dinner while Janelle went home to change and was setting the table when she arrived.

"That's quite a centerpiece you've got there," Janelle said.

Maryl had been receiving a steady stream of flowers all week. Every day was a different flower and the bouquets were small so she knew that Robin was staying within their budget. She had been bringing them home from work and now had a cluster of them on her kitchen table. "Robin is trying to figure out what my favorite flower is."

"I thought you liked roses."

"They're all right," Maryl shrugged. "But I prefer flowers with a little more creativity. Roses are so obvious."

Janelle sat down at the table. "That's funny. I was sure that you liked roses."

"That's all anyone ever gave me," Maryl pointed out. "What would you like to drink?"

"Whatever you're having." Janelle reached out and picked up the small teddy bear amongst the flowers. "So, what *is* your favorite flower?"

"Promise me you won't tell Robin?"

"Of course."

Maryl put two wineglasses on the table and pulled a bottle of red wine from the wine rack. Pointing at the centerpiece she said, "Those purple irises are my favorite, but I don't want her to know that. I don't want her to only ever send me just one kind of flower. I'd rather have a small mixed bouquet than a house full of only one kind of flower." Handing the wine and a corkscrew to Janelle, Maryl turned to stir the spaghetti sauce. "It's driving her crazy that I won't tell her which one is my favorite."

The cork came out of the wine bottle with a sucking pop. "What kind of flowers are you sending her?"

Maryl cringed inwardly. "I haven't."

"Why not?"

"I did buy her something," she said defensively, "but I'm afraid to give it to her."

"What is it?" Janelle asked as she poured the wine.

Maryl went to the bedroom and came back with the bracelet she had purchased on Tuesday evening. Handing the slim box to Janelle she began adding noodles to the boiling water.

"Wow," Janelle breathed. "This is beautiful. It's Topaz, isn't it?"

"They're the same color as her eyes," Maryl pointed out. "I was just passing by and it caught my eye. I had to buy it, but now I'm not so sure."

"What's the problem? Why haven't you given it to her?"

"I haven't noticed that she wears any jewelry and I'm afraid she won't really want it. Also, we agreed on a budget for this sort of thing and it'll be weeks before I can justify it."

"Just give it to her, Maryl. How could she not love this? It's gorgeous."

"I'm afraid that she'll feel obligated to buy me something just as expensive."

Janelle's eyes were huge. "And you'd have a problem with that? Are you feeling okay?"

Maryl sat down at the table and picked up her glass. "Giving jewelry to women is a risky proposition, Janelle."

"It's not a ring, Maryl. You're not making a commitment here."

"But that's what she wants."

Janelle studied her carefully. "You wouldn't be so afraid of it if you didn't want it, too."

"Perhaps," she responded vaguely. Uncomfortable with where the conversation was headed she automatically changed direction. "Did you ever go to see Jerry?"

"Who?"

Maryl almost laughed at the obviousness of Janelle's evasion. "Butcher boy?"

"Oh, him." Janelle sighed. "He's not so bad, I guess. Have you seen him?"

"I don't recall," Maryl admitted. "They all look the same to me."

"Who?"

"Men."

"They do not," Janelle objected.

"It's a lesbian thing," Maryl said airily. "You wouldn't understand."

Janelle rolled her eyes. "You are so full of it."

Maryl made Janelle call a cab after dinner and promised to pick her up early in the morning so she could have her car back. After hugging her goodbye she went back to the kitchen and cleaned up. It was late and she knew Robin would be calling soon so she curled up in bed with the bracelet and waited for the phone to ring. The bracelet begged to be given and she knew it was only a matter of time. In truth, she couldn't wait.

She picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Maybe I should have called sooner," Eva laughed.

"Eva?" Maryl covered her eyes in embarrassment. "Sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Obviously!"

Eva's call suddenly clicked in her head and Maryl sat straight up in bed. "Oh, my God! I forgot group!"

"No one who needs it *ever* forgets," Eva laughed with genuine amusement. "I only called to make sure you were okay."

Maryl fell back on the bed. "I'm so sorry, Eva. I meant to come. I really did. I wanted to say goodbye to everyone."

"I told them you probably weren't coming back. They talked about it and decided that it was best this way and asked me to convey their good wishes. Besides, we had three new members tonight and I'm not sure you would have had a place to sit."

"Still," Maryl objected guiltily, "it wasn't my intention to just drop out like that."

"Get over it," Eva laughed. "Tell me: whom were you expecting to call?"

Maryl's face grew warm. "She's here."

"Who? The woman from the camping trip?"

"Her name is Robin. She moved here."

"Just like that?"

Maryl smiled. "Just like that. She contacted me the day after I talked to you last. She's got a good job and a place to live and she swears she's here to stay."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Terrified and excited all at once."

"Well, I'll be."

"I'm trying to be cautious," Maryl admitted, "but it's hard. It's almost impossible to think past the pull I feel for her."

"Congratulations are in order then. I'm happy for you, Maryl. You deserve to be happy. I hope things work out between the two of you."

"Thanks." Their last talk popped into her head. "How are things with Kirsten?"

"Well, like you I'm trying to be cautious. She has an appointment with the doctor you told me about in a few weeks and she's having a hard time keeping her hopes reasonable, but she seems to be more alive lately. There is a support group, but she has to see the doctor first and get a referral to it. I think she's looking forward to that almost more than anything. She doesn't feel so alone anymore."

"Have you told her how you feel about her?"

"Not in so many words, but I think she's finally aware of it. By the way, she asked me to tell you that regardless of what happens with the doctor, she's grateful for your help. So am I."

"I'm surprised you told her that you talked to me."

"I love her, Maryl. For there to be any hope at all, I had to tell her."

Maryl felt foolish. "I'll *never* discuss it with another person, Eva. Tell her that?"

"She came to that conclusion on her own, but I will."

"You know, I usually have a little Christmas party every year. I haven't set a date yet, but I'd love it if the two of you would come."

"Really? That would be great."

"I'll call you when I've got a date for it."

"I look forward to it. It's unusual for former group members to become friends, but I'd really like it if we could stay in touch."

"Consider it done," Maryl said fondly.

"Well, I should let you go. I'd hate to make you miss Robin's call."

"Thanks, Eva."

She barely had time to process Eva's call when the phone rang a second time. Feeling lucky, she tried again. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey, beautiful. How was your day?"

"Good." Life made sense again. "Did you miss me?"

"I never realized before that missing someone could be a physical sensation."

Maryl's heart cramped painfully. "You poor thing. I feel that way, too, but I'd rather it be me feeling it than you."

"I want to see you more often. Even if it's only for a few minutes a day. Is that possible?"

Her heart melted. "Can I come see you at work tomorrow on my lunch?"

"Of course. You've been avoiding the store, haven't you?"

"Yes," Maryl admitted.

"Why?"

"I didn't want to interfere with your job and it's too hard to be that close and feel like I *have* to see you."

"I should have made this clearer," Robin sighed. "I *want* you to come to the store. Shop wherever you like, but *please!* Come see me every chance you get."

"Really?"

Robin gave her specific instructions on how to find her office. "When you come tomorrow, I'll have a visitor tag waiting for you at the customer service desk. In time, my employees will recognize you and you won't have any trouble. I'll also arrange for you to get my discount when you shop..."

"Wait...!"

"No," Robin said firmly. "It's a done deal. I can give you my discount if I want."

Maryl wasn't sure what to say. A discount would be nice, but it seemed like too much. She didn't want to feel indebted.

"If it really makes you uncomfortable," Robin offered, "you can fix me dinner now and then."

That way the discount is for the food I eat."

"I don't have anything comparable to give to you."

"The discount doesn't come out my pocket, Maryl. It's just a courtesy from the store and it doesn't require any reciprocation on your part. Besides, I've got security mirrors for windows and I can see the whole store. I can sit up there in my office and watch you while you shop. It will drive me insane with want for you."

"How come whenever you want to give me something, or do something for me, you've always got selfish motives to justify it?"

"Call it a character flaw."

Maryl held up the bracelet and decided to give it to Robin when she saw her the next day. "I accept. On one condition."

"Uh oh."

She smiled. "I want to give you something and you can't bring up our money agreement."

"What did you get me?"

"You'll see."

~***~

Robin's door was partially open and Maryl stepped inside quickly in hopes that she would catch her unawares. Robin looked up from her desk and Maryl was surprised. "I didn't know you wore glasses."

Robin took them off and dropped them carelessly on her paperwork. "Only for reading." She stood up with a smile. "I feel like jumping around like a little kid. You look so good."

Maryl feigned doubt. "Can you even see me?"

Robin squinted back. "I see you just fine. Come here." She held her arms open and Maryl all but flung herself into them. "How long can you stay?" Robin asked.

Maryl held her watch up behind Robin's back. "Thirty-five minutes." Adjusting her arms to hold the slim body more firmly, Maryl settled in and let Robin's presence fill her up. "We definitely need to do this more often."

"Did you come with Janelle?"

Maryl shook her head. "She had errands to run."

"Errands?"

Robin's tone was curious and Maryl leaned back to see her face. She followed Robin's eyes out the windows. "What are you looking at?"

Robin stepped closer to the dark glass and pointed to the tables clustered near the deli. "She's right there."

Maryl spotted her at a table with a red headed man. "Is that Jerry?"

"Yes. It's his day off today, so that looks like a date to me. She's been in here every day for the last two weeks talking to him. Didn't she tell you?"

"No." Maryl's evil twin emerged. "Her life is about to get very interesting."

"Be nice," Robin laughed. "Does she know you're here?"

"I doubt it."

Robin closed the office door and Maryl suppressed a shudder of anticipation when she heard the lock engage. The arms that came around her from behind took her mind off her plans for Janelle. Leaning back, she turned her face up and closed her eyes as Robin kissed her. The phone was an unwelcome distraction. "Don't go away," Robin whispered to her.

Maryl sat down on the old love seat under the one-way mirrors and watched her as she spoke to someone named Greg. It sounded as if Greg were calling in sick and from Robin's words on the subject it was obvious that Greg was sick often and not likely to return unscathed. She smiled as Robin hung up. "You're sexy when you boss people around."

Robin stifled a grin and dropped down next to her. "I'd be more than happy to boss you around any time you like."

Maryl laughed as she snuggled closer. "You're welcome to try. This little couch is cozy. Your idea?"

"No. I think it's been here longer than either of us has been alive. So, where's my present? I'm dying of curiosity."

Maryl prayed that she was doing the right thing, but there was one more thing she just had to know before she could hand it over. "Um...Do you consider yourself to be butch or femme?"

"Definitely both. Why?"

"Just making sure." She reached into her purse and pulled out the jeweler's box. Placing it in Robin's open hand she explained, "I didn't go looking for this. I was just walking by and it

screamed your name."

"What is it?"

"Open it," Maryl urged.

Robin lifted the lid and sighed. "Oh, Maryl. It's lovely."

"The stones match your eyes," Maryl pointed out.

Robin's slender fingers gently lifted the gold bracelet from its bed and held it up to the light. "It's beautiful, baby." She clutched it to her chest and leaned over to kiss her.

Maryl could see that she was on the verge of tears and could not have asked for a response more satisfying. "I've never seen you wear jewelry. You don't have to wear it if you..."

"Of course, I'll wear it! Here, put it on me?"

Maryl took the bracelet and fastened it around Robin's left wrist. "If you like jewelry, why don't you wear it?"

Robin held her hand out, shaking the bracelet and admiring the way it looked on her arm. "I have a strange relationship with accessories. It never occurs to me to buy myself rings and such. When I do have them I usually forget to put them on. At the moment I don't own any jewelry. When I left Tammy I left her all the jewelry I had. She was the one who bought it for me and I didn't want any of it because I associated it all with her. Like you and this bracelet. Every time I look at it or wear it, I'll think about you. I didn't want to think about Tammy anymore."

"So, if I bought you jewelry you would wear it?"

Robin looked at her with amusement. "Yes, I would wear it, but if you buy me anything else I'm going to consider our agreement about money as void."

Maryl smiled. She had the information she needed. "I'm glad you like it."

Robin scooted down on the couch and fit herself under Maryl's arm. "Thank you, Maryl. I love it."

Maryl smiled into her hair. Robin was still admiring her wrist and Maryl slid her fingers over the delicate forearm in a deliberately sensual caress. "Are you free tomorrow night?" Robin nodded against her shoulder. "I would love to cook dinner for you." Robin tilted her head back and Maryl thrilled at the vulnerability she saw in the golden eyes.

"Sounds wonderful."

Maryl brushed her fingers over Robin's long throat. "Is tomorrow night okay for you?"

Robin hummed in response.

~***~

Maryl slid the chicken casserole into the oven. The salad was already made and chilling in the refrigerator next to a nice bottle of white wine. She had a fresh loaf of french bread that she would prepare later and dessert was a store bought apple pie she would heat after dinner and serve with vanilla ice cream. With the casserole in the oven she now had nearly an hour to take a shower and get dressed before Robin would arrive.

"Thank God I took the afternoon off," she murmured to herself. Maryl was not a messy person, but she had spent most of the afternoon cleaning her house. She wanted everything to be perfect.

Robin knew that Maryl wasn't perfect, of course, but Maryl wanted to impress her. In a way, it was like they were just starting to date. Maybe they were doing everything backwards (and Maryl was by no means ready to really move forward), but this was an important step. Inviting a woman home for dinner carried a certain intimacy with it. Robin would see how Maryl lived. The way a person decorated their living space said a lot about who a person was. Maryl was inviting Robin to see that part of herself and she was a little nervous about it. She wanted Robin to like what she saw and feel at home in her space. Maryl knew from experience that you could be comfortable with a person and feel completely out of place in their home. If she and Robin had any chance at all of someday being together, they had to be comfortable in a home together. Not being comfortable in each others homes would not be a good sign.

Maryl still wasn't sure what she was going to wear and she went straight to her closet to figure it out. Rupert padded into the room behind her and jumped up onto the bed to watch. Settling down with his chin resting on his paws at the edge of the bed, he watched as Maryl rifled through her clothes.

It took a while, but Maryl finally settled on a casual pair of tan slacks and a cream colored sweater. It was nice, but not too dressy; casual, but not a slouch-around-the-house outfit. She would wear a comfortable pair of sandals with it.

With that decided, Maryl headed for the shower. She was rinsing the conditioner out of her hair when the smoke alarm went off and Rupert began to bark.

~***~

Robin had gone home early to change clothes. Her work clothes were comfortable for the most part, but Maryl had suggested that she wear something casual. Exchanging her slacks and blazer for blue jeans and a white T-shirt, she had stopped at a florist's and picked up a handful of poppies. Except for Maryl's statement that she didn't like roses, she was still trying to figure out what the younger blond *did* like. So far, all of her gifts of flowers had elicited the same enthusiastic response. Maybe she could ask Janelle which flowers were Maryl's favorites. They were best friends, after all. Janelle should know something like that.

Turning onto Maryl's street, she saw right away that Maryl's front door was open and some grey smoke was wafting out. There was no way she could prevent the panic she felt. Throwing her car into park and yanking out the keys, she ran up the walk, the sound of a smoke alarm getting louder.

Running through the open door, she almost yelled out, but then she saw Maryl across the room hitting the smoke alarm with a broom. The woman she loved had a towel wrapped around herself, but with her arms up in the air, it rode up and showed just enough of that perfect ass that Robin had to smile. Maryl had obviously been in the shower. Her hair was still sopping wet and she had soap down one leg. It was the most adorable thing she'd ever seen.

From the smell and the lack of the dense smoke that usually accompanied a serious threat, Robin deduced that dinner was toasted. There wasn't much she could do about that, but she could help with that piercing noise. Walking up behind Maryl, she placed a hand on a naked shoulder. "Can I help with that?"

Maryl jerked around in surprise, one hand going to stop her towel from falling off. "Oh, shit."

Robin smiled at the shocked look and reached up to pull the cover off of the alarm. She pulled the battery out and the sound stopped. "That's better. Are you all right?"

Maryl's face crumpled and big, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "I can't believe this. I just can't." She turned and walked into the kitchen.

It was funny, but at the same time, Robin understood how Maryl must feel. She followed and found Maryl standing over an open oven still smoking and burned food on the floor.

"I set the oven to preheat," Maryl said with a dull voice. "I must have forgotten to turn it down."

Robin put an arm around Maryl's shoulders for comfort. "What was it?"

"Chicken casserole with asparagus tips and mushrooms on rice."

"It sounds really good. I'm not starving, you know. I can wait to eat for a while. Can we make more?"

Maryl wiped at her face with the back of one hand. "That's not the point. I wanted everything to be perfect and now it's ruined. I burned dinner and the house smells like smoke. I'm not even dressed."

"I don't mind that part at all."

Maryl sighed and moved out from under Robin's arm. "You can't make me feel better. Maybe we should do this another night."

The despondency of Maryl's voice and demeanor made Robin frown. "We can if you want to, but I really want to stay. I'll help you clean up and we'll make more. Or we'll eat something else. This is not a big deal to me. Why don't you go ahead and get dressed and I'll do something with this. Okay?"

"You don't have to clean this up, Robin. I can do it."

She watched as Maryl turned to pick up a roll of paper towels. If she didn't do something right now, she was afraid that Maryl would make her leave and things would never be made right. Robin stepped around the mess and took Maryl's face in her hands. She saw the tear tracks and that Maryl was trying not to look at her. "Hey. Come on, baby. Look at me."

Blue eyes filled with more tears slowly shifted.

"I don't care about dinner," Robin said to the sad eyes. "I didn't really come here for dinner. I only came to see you. I missed you all day." She placed a kiss on Maryl's forehead, her nose, and finally on her lips. "All I care about is being with you. I don't care what we do or what we eat. I just want to see you and talk to you."

Robin began placing gentle kisses all over Maryl's face, relieved when she felt the smaller woman start to relax. "I missed you. I love you, baby."

Maryl's arms went around Robin's slender waist and they held each other tightly, their bodies starting to sway. "I just wanted everything to be perfect," Maryl said softly.

"Everything *is* perfect, baby." Robin shifted slightly and they fit together even better. "It's not what you do, or what you say, or what you look like, Maryl. It's just *you*. All I need or want is for you just to *be*. That's what makes me happy. Please, let me stay?"

Maryl sighed. "I really am a good cook."

"I know."

"I spent all afternoon cleaning house."

"I like your house. It feels really comfortable."

Maryl pulled back, hopeful eyes searching Robin's face. "Does it really? You're not just saying that?"

"No. I wouldn't do that." Robin caressed the side of Maryl's face. "I caught a glimpse that once when I came to pick you up. I really like the colors. Maybe you could help me with my place? It just doesn't have any warmth at all and I can't figure out how to fix it."

Maryl beamed a smile at her.

Robin smiled back. "Why don't you finish getting dressed and I'll see what I can do about this. Then we can talk about what we want to do for dinner."

"You don't mind cleaning up?"

"Nope. Go on. Get dressed and let's get this date on the move."

Maryl reached up and pulled Robin down for a kiss. "Thank you."

"No problem," Robin shrugged. She watched Maryl walk away with an ache of longing, then squared her shoulders and looked at the mess on the floor. Paper towels weren't going to cut it. This was a job for..."Rupert!"

~***~

Maryl had a good week. Janelle finally opened up about Jerry and admitted that she was afraid to talk about him for fear that it would all go away. Maryl understood the feeling completely and was glad she had not teased her about it. She was glad to see Janelle excited about him because it seemed different than any other man she had dated. Maryl kept her sincere hopes close to her chest and took her cues on how to act from Janelle's efforts to be casual about it. They did, however, begin car-pooling to the store on their lunches. Maryl refrained from mentioning that she could see the two of them from Robin's office. Not that she was watching. She was usually too busy cuddling with Robin to notice anything.

Late Friday morning, a flower delivery service brought Maryl a corsage size box and she signed for it excitedly.

"What is it?" Janelle asked.

"I don't know yet." She opened the card first. It read: *I promised myself I wouldn't do anything this overt, but I just couldn't resist. R.*

With a feeling of eager dread, Maryl turned so no one could see and gingerly opened the box. She closed it immediately and blushed. "Oh, my God."

"What is it?" Janelle asked again.

Maryl peeked back into the box and studied the orchid a second time. It looked *exactly* like genitalia. Different colors, of course, but the clitoris, vagina and vulva were obvious. She had not known there even *was* a flower that so closely resembled a woman's sexual organs. "Oh my god," she repeated. Closing the box she hugged it to her chest protectively.

"I want to see," Janelle demanded.

Maryl shook her head tightly and tried to keep the grin from her face. "No."

"Come on, Maryl. You know how devious I am when I want something. You might as well just show it to me and get it over with."

Maryl knew she was right, but it felt almost like she would be showing Janelle her *own* genitalia. "I'm too embarrassed."

"What is it?"

"A flower."

Janelle frowned. "You're embarrassed to show me a flower?"

Maryl laughed nervously. "I don't think you've ever seen a flower like this one. *I've* never seen one before."

Janelle held her hands out and waited.

Maryl considered. "You have to promise to take it to the bathroom to look at it and you can't tease me about it. Okay?"

"Deal." Janelle snatched the box from her hand and left the office. Maryl sat down and tried to find a piece of work that made sense to her. She heard a muffled "Yikes!" from down the hall and blushed even harder. She was on the phone when Janelle came back and set the flower on the edge of her desk so they couldn't immediately talk.

A little later, Janelle rolled her chair over and whispered, "Is that really what *it* looks like?"

Maryl was surprised that Janelle wasn't sure. "Yeah."

Janelle looked stunned. "It's so *pretty*."

"Are you telling me that you've never seen yours?" Janelle's look of embarrassed horror sent Maryl into a whispering rage. "Do you have any idea how messed up that is? This is *your* body. It belongs to you and no one else. You control who sees it and who touches it. This is the *one* thing that truly is yours to command. But you can't look at it? Have you ever seen your back? It's harder to see and doesn't give you a tenth the pleasure, but you don't have any problem twisting yourself up to see that. Somewhere along the line someone convinced you that your genitals don't belong to you. That you should keep it clean but only so it would be available for someone else to control. *Real* women control every aspect of their lives and their bodies, Janelle. You get a mirror and start spending time with your vagina. I can't believe you bought into that line of crap."

"Hear, hear."

Maryl spun to the woman in the reception window and her mouth dropped open in shock. "Robin's mom," she said with a gulp.

"It's Olivia, dear." She looked past Maryl to Janelle. "I recommend a makeup mirror on a stand; preferably one with lights and magnification. And don't just look at it-worship it and write poetry to it. You have a lifetime of neglect to make up for."

Maryl appreciated the unexpected support, but her mind was whirling. "I didn't know you were coming this weekend."

Olivia smiled. "Neither does Robin."

Maryl got to her feet and reached out to take her hand. "It's so good to see you!"

"I was hoping we could have lunch. I know it's last minute, but I've come all this way and..."

"No! This is great!" She recognized the guilt trip for what it was, but this was Robin's mother and she really was glad to see her. "I've got about 20 minutes before I can leave for lunch though."

"I'll wait."

"Do you want coffee or tea or anything?"

"No, dear. I'm just fine."

Robin's mother sat down in a chair and picked up a Newsweek. Maryl turned to Janelle in stupefaction. "It's Robin's mom."

"I heard. She seems nice," Janelle's voice dropped to a whisper, "but I think I could have done without a total stranger telling me to write poetry to my crotch."

"Somebody had to do it," Maryl said absently. She was wondering if she should call Robin and if she did, should she tell her that her mother was in town or just say that she was going to run errands and wouldn't see her over lunch. She didn't want to lie, but she also didn't want to blow Olivia's cover. It was a good bet that Robin would come running if she had time to intercept them and Maryl was curious about why Olivia was here. "Janelle, I need a favor. When you get to the store, you've got to tell Robin why I'm not there. Please?"

"Sure."

Maryl dove into her work and the 20 minutes flew by. She locked the orchid in her desk drawer with a last look and let Janelle close the office for lunch.

"Where would you suggest we eat?" Olivia asked.

Maryl thought about it. "To be honest, the hospital cafeteria next door is very good. It's also cheap and close."

"Perfect." Olivia looped her arm through Maryl's and fell into step with her. "This may be the last time we get to talk."

Maryl was instantly fearful. "Why?"

"Robin is going to kill me when she finds out that I looked you up." Maryl laughed in relief. "She expressly forbade me from seeking you out," Olivia continued. "She is very concerned with giving you the time and space you need to work this all out. When she finds out that I'm here, I'm afraid that she's going to be furious with me."

"You should know that my friend, Janelle, is going to see her shortly and tell her why I'm not meeting her for lunch."

"You cancelled a date with Robin for me?"

"It's not a date exactly. More like a few minutes alone in the middle of the day."

"I see."

Maryl glanced over and saw the glint of understanding in Olivia's eyes. "I hope she's not too hard on you."

Olivia huffed. "She's not too big to spank."

Maryl laughed and filed the information away for future reference. They didn't speak again until they had their food and were sitting in a corner of the cafeteria. "I assume you wanted to talk to me about something?"

Olivia spread her napkin on her lap and looked up with an open expression. "Do you love my daughter?"

It didn't even occur to Maryl to hedge. "Yes."

"Then what's the problem?"

Maryl looked down at her tray and suddenly wasn't hungry anymore. She set her fork down and put her hands in her lap. She could feel Olivia watching her. "I'm afraid."

"Of Robin?"

"Maybe. Probably more of myself."

"Why?"

Maryl looked away uncomfortably.

"This is just between us, dear. Perhaps it will help if I tell you what Robin told me." Maryl glanced at her and nodded. "She thinks that you don't believe it's possible for someone to really love you. I guess your other relationships ended badly, though she wasn't clear about what happened. She did tell me that you expect your lovers to hurt you and that you're afraid she'll hurt you, too. She also mentioned that you might feel as if it's something about you that causes them to hurt you. Is that right?"

Maryl took a deep breath and forced herself to meet Olivia's eyes. "Yes."

Olivia cocked her head and thought for a moment. "I suppose I'm prejudiced in Robin's favor so a testimonial from me is just wasted breath."

"No," Maryl objected quickly. "Please. Say whatever you want."

"She's a good woman," Olivia said firmly. "I'm proud of her. She's generous and reliable and honest. She does like to play pranks and tease, but she's never mean-spirited about it. She did punch a boy in the face once..."

"She told me about that."

"I'm inclined to think he had it coming, but it affected her very badly. Her father and I were about ready to put her in therapy, but she eventually worked it out and I'm not aware that she has ever hit anyone again."

"I don't think she would ever hit me," Maryl admitted.

"Did she tell you about Tammy?"

"Yes."

Olivia sighed and looked off into the distance. "That about broke my heart to see her suffer so. She tried so hard to make things right. I gave up on Tammy *months* before Robin did, but they had been together for so long and Robin wanted to believe that it was just one of those times that all marriages go through and if she worked at it, it would pass and everything would be okay. I think she stopped loving her long before it ended, but she felt it was important to give it an honest effort considering all the time they had been together. I hated what it did to her spirit, but I respected her more as a woman-not my little girl-for trying."

"What happened?" Maryl asked. "Why did Tammy change?"

"We don't know. Robin swore to me that she hadn't cheated on her or hit her and I believe her. I wondered if Tammy had a medical condition for while, but she still appears healthy. Maybe if Tammy had ever accused her of anything we would have a place to start, but...nothing."

Maryl pushed her tray aside and leaned on her elbows. Olivia's openness inspired her to talk. "I

do love her, you know. Almost from the first minute. On the camping trip I could surrender to it because I had the safety net of knowing that it would be over before she could come to her senses. But now that she's here...? I still can't believe that she changed her life based on a four day fantasy."

"Was it a fantasy?"

"Yes. And now she wants to make it a reality and it's so incredibly tempting, but..." Maryl briefly covered her mouth to hold back a sob. "She changed me somehow. I've thrown myself with reckless abandon into one disastrous relationship after another all my life. I want to throw myself at Robin, too, but it's different this time. I'm different. I believe that she's the one I've been looking for, but I'm not sure if I can trust my feelings. They've led me astray before and I'm not sure I'll recover if I'm wrong this time. I need to hold back until I'm sure because it feels like if I'm wrong this time, something irreplaceable will be broken. Maybe it is something about me that makes my lovers so hateful. I don't know, but if it is, I need to give Robin time to change her mind before I can commit myself to her."

Olivia reached across the table and took her hand. "I can't make any promises about the future, dear, but I find it hard to believe that you are anything but a joy to be with. I *can* guarantee that if it doesn't work between the two of you it will only end after every option has been exhausted. Robin commits her heart completely and unless you tell her you don't love her-and it's *really* true-she'll wait for you for the rest of your life."

Maryl desperately wanted to believe her. "I didn't want her to leave her family, you know."

Olivia laughed. "Don't be silly. She hasn't left us. In fact, Julian was quite taken with this little town of yours and is thinking about expanding his contracting business to this area. I find it quite charming myself. In a few years, who knows?"

Maryl used her napkin to wipe her eyes. "I'm sorry. I seem to be crying all the time lately."

Olivia patted her arm. "You go right ahead, dear. Crying is the best medicine for what ails you."

"I can't believe how cool you are about Robin being a lesbian."

"Oh, I admit, I was terribly disappointed at first, but I didn't love her any less and I finally realized that I was mostly disappointed because I had been looking forward to her being a mother. I so wanted to hold her babies in my arms." Olivia grinned. "As your future mother-in-law, I'm entitled to ask: have you ever thought about having children?"

This struck Maryl as supremely funny and she laughed helplessly.

"I only ask," Olivia continued gracefully, "because Robin is absolutely terrified of being pregnant. She was in the delivery room to take pictures for Julian's first child and I think it traumatized her. I believe she would love to be a mother, but it won't happen unless her wife wants to make the baby."

"I used to think about it all the time," Maryl admitted reluctantly, "but I gave up on it. I haven't thought about it for a long time."

Olivia's eyes gleamed dangerously. "Well, before you dismiss it entirely, let me tell you a secret." She leaned close and spoke softly. "Robin obviously can't make you pregnant, but Bruce is willing."

Maryl was stunned. "Bruce wants to make me pregnant?"

"Not you specifically, dear. Bruce has told me any number of times since he was a young man that if Robin ever found a woman that wanted children with her, he would offer to be the donor. Since Robin can't produce sperm, Bruce feels that as her twin, his would be the closest she could come to producing a child of her own. I know it's terribly inappropriate for me to begin nagging you about grandchildren when you haven't yet accepted the idea that you're going to marry my daughter, but I may not be allowed to talk to you again for some time and I just can't give up on seeing her become a mother. I know it's selfish of me, but she'd be so good at it and you...I have a feeling about you, Maryl. I think you would be a wonderful mother to my grandchildren and I can't wait to have you as a daughter-in-law."

Maryl covered her mouth and stared.

"See, now I've frightened you. Robin is going to skin me alive."

"No...I'm okay." Maryl took a drink of her soda. "I just never expected to have a conversation anything like this. I never even considered the idea of having a mother-in law. It seems so strange. Aren't we supposed to hate each other?"

Olivia grimaced. "I could try, if it's important to you, but I'd rather not."

Maryl smiled at her. "I don't know what to say about giving you grandchildren."

"It's not about giving me what I want," Olivia said seriously. "Just put the information in the back of your mind and let it simmer. If things work out as I hope and you two decide that you want to have a family, the information will be there. In the meantime, you should eat. You've got to keep your strength up."

~***~

Maryl was propped up in bed with Robin's orchid sitting against her knees. The flower was beautiful, but so blatantly suggestive that it took her breath away. It was late, but she called anyway.

"Hello?"

"It's beautiful, Robin."

"I was going to send you pansies, but I saw it and I thought of you. I hope I didn't cross the line."

"Pansies would have been nice," Maryl said softly, "but this..."

"Are you looking at it right now?"

"Mm hmm."

"What are you wearing?"

Maryl laughed and snuggled down a bit in her bed. "An old T-shirt and underwear."

"Ooh, sounds sexy."

Maryl laughed again. "What are *you* wearing?"

"Nothing."

"No, really."

"Really. I sleep nude."

Maryl closed her eyes and remembered.

"I'm sorry about my mom today," Robin said into the silence. "I asked her not to..."

"I'm glad she did," Maryl admitted. "Don't be too hard on her on my account. I like your mom."

"She didn't scare you then? She was worried that she scared you."

"I was scared before."

"And now?"

"Maybe not as much." Maryl couldn't get the image of Robin naked out of her head. "If you're nude..."

"Yes?"

Maryl blushed. "Sorry. I don't want to be a tease."

"I wish you would." Robin sounded sincere.

"Can you see your breasts?"

"Yes."

Maryl covered her eyes in embarrassment. "Are your nipples hiding?"

"Hmm. The left one is a little perky, but the right one is sound asleep. Should I wake it up?"

"No. I just wanted to get your image right."

"What about yours?"

Maryl pulled up the neck of her T-shirt and looked. "Still awake, but not paying any attention."

"I miss them," Robin said quietly.

"I miss yours, too." There didn't seem to be much to say after that and Maryl let silence fill the void.

"I'm going to sign up for that pottery class on Monday," Robin said. "Are you interested in joining me? No strings attached."

"I don't know. I'm not very gifted in the artistic realm."

"That's the beauty of pottery. A bowl is a bowl and a cup is a cup. If it holds water when you're done, you've done it correctly."

"I'll think about it and let you know before Monday morning." The silence returned and Maryl sighed. "You're being awfully patient with me. Don't you ever want to...?" She couldn't finish.

Robin's voice was husky. "Rip your clothes off and fall on you with my mouth and hands until you'll agree to anything if I'll only let you come?"

A relentless wave of pleasure coursed through Maryl's body. "Something like that, yes."

"*Constantly*. But it's your heart I'm waiting for. It can't be taken-only given, and I'm willing to wait as long as it takes."

"Am I hurting you-making you wait like this?"

Robin laughed. "Your kisses make it all okay. I'm fine."

Maryl relaxed.

"Um..." Robin said with hesitation. "You're not going to hang up now, are you?"

"I don't have to, no. Why?"

"It's just that my right nipple woke up and you could talk to it if you want to."

Maryl grinned and held back a laugh. "I'm not very good at talking dirty."

"You don't have to be. In fact, I won't even listen." There was a brief pause and then Robin's voice was far away. "Go ahead, Maryl."

Embarrassed at herself, Maryl made kissing sounds into the phone until she heard Robin screech.

"Mom! What are you doing in here?"

Maryl held her breath so she could hear better.

"What am I doing?" Robin's mom sounded surprised. "What are *you* doing?"

"Maryl's talking to my... Why am I explaining this to you?"

Fighting not to laugh out loud, Maryl concentrated.

"Oh," Olivia said with understanding. "It's phone sex, right?"

"Mom! You're totally out of control!" Robin didn't sound angry so much as embarrassed and it only made Maryl's hysteria more intense.

"I thought you were having a nightmare. I can't believe you talk to your old mother this way." Olivia's distant voice held a dramatic quiver. "And after all I've done for you."

"Cripes, Mom. Go to bed."

"Tell Maryl I said hello."

Robin's voice was suddenly clear and aggravated. "Mom says hello."

Maryl finally lost control and laughed harder than she had laughed in years.

"She's laughing, Mom. Are you happy now?"

"Goodnight, dear." Olivia sounded extremely pleased with herself.

It was all Maryl could do to keep the phone to her ear.

"It's not funny, Maryl."

"Yes, it is!"

"Fine. Next time she can catch *you*. She's going to tell everyone about this. I'll never be able to

go home again."

"Oh, God!" Maryl gasped. "I think I gave myself a headache."

"Serves you right."

"Oh," she finally said. "I needed that. I may never talk dirty again, but I sure needed a good laugh."

"If you don't mind telling me, what did you two talk about today?"

"What a good person you are and that she hopes I'll marry you." She kept the baby information to herself for now. "I love your mom. She's great."

"She is pretty great," Robin admitted. "I just wish she didn't get such a kick out of embarrassing me."

"You love it and you know it."

""Don't tell her, okay?"

"I won't." The line was silent for a long moment and Maryl would have been perfectly happy to just listen to her breathing.

"Can I ask you something?" Robin said tentatively.

"Sure."

"What's your last name?"

Maryl could have sworn she had told her, but she couldn't remember when. "My last name is Jeffries."

"Well, then. Good night, Maryl Jeffries."

"Good night, Robin Griffith."

~***~

By holding her breath, Maryl managed to contain her enthusiasm until the balloon was several hundred feet in the air. There was little or no wind in the brisk morning sky and they floated lazily above the take-off field. The pilot's helpers on the ground were getting smaller by the moment as they finished picking up gear and prepared to follow them wherever the wind took them. The sun was just beginning to peek over the distant hills and the sky was a brilliant pink. The gondola shifted slightly as they moved about, but it reminded Maryl more of a raft than anything else.

Taken in by the glorious vista spread out before her, Maryl leaned over the side of the gondola and spread her arms out to embrace the vivid December sunrise. "This is magnificent!" She shouted. She could hear the support staff below laughing at her outburst, but somehow she knew they understood.

She was glad she had taken Shine's advice. It really was cold. It helped to have Robin at her back. Hugging the arm Robin had wrapped around her middle, she pressed back into her. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

Robin's reply was soft and low in her ear. "I've seen you."

"You're so sweet." Maryl studied the landscape carefully, anxious to commit it all to memory. She had no way of knowing if she would ever do this again, so it was important to soak it all in. The sun suddenly crested the horizon and sent rays of pure brilliance her way. She looked down to shield her eyes and spotted Robin's hand on the gondola's edge. Maryl reached out and covered it with her own.

She was startled to find the hand rigid and it brought the fact that Robin's entire body was unnaturally stiff to the forefront of her awareness. She had been marginally aware that Robin was nervous prior to take-off, but Maryl had been totally self-absorbed in her own excitement. It had been easy to dismiss the signs because Robin always seemed so strong and confident. It was hard to believe that anything could frighten her, but now that Maryl was thinking about it, it seemed so obvious. She groaned inwardly at her insensitivity.

Turning to slip an arm around Robin's waist, Maryl saw the tightly closed eyes only briefly before Robin buried her face in Maryl's shoulder. "Oh no. Why didn't you tell me you were afraid of heights? What were you thinking? You didn't have to come."

"I'm okay," Robin whispered raggedly. "I can handle it. How high are we?"

"Not very," Maryl lied.

The pilot spoke up for the first time since lift off. "Everything okay?"

Maryl shook her head. "Take us down, please."

"No!" Robin said urgently. "I'm okay. I don't feel sick and it can't get any worse than this. Just keep going."

Maryl wrapped her arms around Robin's shoulders. "I don't mind if we land. I saw the sunrise and it was beautiful. I don't want you to be miserable a moment longer than necessary."

"I can do it," Robin insisted. "Isn't there supposed to be champagne?"

"Maybe she should sit down," the pilot suggested. "That seems to help some people."

Robin seemed to collapse at the suggestion and wrapped her arms tightly around Maryl's legs. "I can do it," she repeated. "*Please*, don't land on my account."

Maryl's indecision was made more difficult by the look of amused nonchalance of the pilot. A gust of wind ruffled her hair and she realized they were finally moving away from the take-off zone. The pilot used the burners to lift them higher in the layer of moving air. Dropping her hand to Robin's hair, she looked down as Robin lifted her eyes.

"Please, Maryl. This really is better." Robin's grip seemed to relax a bit. "I sure wouldn't mind something to drink, but I'm okay."

The pilot crouched down and dug into a wicker basket at his feet. "I've got just the thing." He pulled out a small silver flask and held it out to Robin. "Brandy. Good stuff, too. Not swill."

Robin reached for it gratefully. "Thanks, but who's flying this thing?"

"God," he grinned. "Relax. I promise not to crash today."

Robin twisted the lid from the flask. "Do I have your word on that?"

"My life." He patted Robin's knee, then squeezed Maryl's arm and turned his back as he rested his hand on the burner.

Maryl cupped her hand around the side of Robin's face as she drank deeply of the brandy. She could see the lines of tension around the dim brown eyes and her skin was pale. She couldn't imagine the courage it had taken to climb aboard, not to mention her determination to see it through.

Except for the occasional roar of the burners, it was totally quiet. They weren't going anywhere fast so she crouched next to Robin. "Why did you agree to come with me?" she asked quietly. "All you had to do was tell me. I would never have asked you to do this if I'd known how hard it would be for you."

Robin drank from the flask before answering. "I had to come."

"Why?"

"How could I ask any less of myself than I ask of you?"

Maryl didn't understand. "What are you talking about?"

"You're only asking me to accompany you for 50 minutes. I'm asking for 50 years."

"The two aren't comparable, Robin."

"I know." Robin reached out and put a cold hand to Maryl's cheek. "It's much scarier to risk your heart than your life."

Maryl gaped as Robin's logic sorted itself out in her head. That Robin felt her own current terror was less than Maryl's seemed absurd, but she seemed to genuinely believe it. Maryl stood up and swept her gaze over the landscape.

This doesn't scare me at all. I can't even guess how far off the ground I am, but it doesn't matter. I feel completely safe and secure. But Robin is paralyzed by it and it seems that she's trying to tell me that she sees our relationship in the same terms. When she looks at a future with me, she feels like I do when I look at all this beauty around me. And when it comes to our future, I'm the one cowering on the floor. Is that possible? Is that really how she sees me? Is my heart really paralyzed by irrational fear? Does she look at me and wish there were just one thing she could say that would make me feel safe?

Knowing she would have to take some time to think about it, Maryl made a decision. She reached out to touch the pilot's arm and silently indicated that he should take them down. He nodded his assent. Maryl had already seen the best part of the experience. The rest was unnecessary. What mattered now was alleviating Robin's distress.

Twenty minutes later, she was sitting next to Robin in the grass, watching the balloon rise into the morning sky.

"We didn't have to land."

"Yes, we did."

"I know you were excited about this flight, Maryl. I'm sorry you felt like you had to cut it short."

"I'm not. I got what I wanted out of it."

The roar of the balloon's burner seemed to accentuate the stillness of the dawn. Maryl tipped her head back and took a deep breath, feeling the crisp air deep inside her lungs.

"Are you upset with me?"

She turned to look at Robin's worried face. "I'm really not. I got to go up in a hot air balloon and see the sunrise. It's not how long I got to ride in the balloon that's important to me."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"You seem...pensive."

Maryl took one of Robin's hands in her own, content just to be touching her. "Maybe I am, just a little. I'm letting things percolate for the moment, but I'm not upset or disappointed. I promise."

"Okay."

The ground crew for the balloon had everything packed up now and Maryl waved to them as they headed out in pursuit. Soon, there were no sounds at all but nature waking up and two women breathing. Maryl let the serenity of it seep into her soul and closed her eyes.

In the last weeks, Maryl had seen Robin every day. Sometimes it was only for a short time, but they made up for it by talking on the phone for hours every night before bed. Just for the fun of spending time with the older woman, Maryl had joined her in the Monday night pottery class and they were having a blast. In a surprising turn of events, Maryl turned out to be the one with a knack for feeling what the clay could become. Robin did all right, of course, but Maryl's pottery had what seemed to be a touch of art. She was thinking about taking more advanced classes as they became available.

It was becoming harder and harder for Maryl to imagine not having Robin in her life. Still, they had not made love since the camping trip. That was not to say that they didn't torment each other relentlessly with passionate kisses and fiery touches. But, it was the talking that drew them closest. It had never been like this for Maryl with any other woman she had known.

Maryl had been very upset when she learned that Robin had moved to Edgewater to pursue her, but everything that had happened since then had seemed so inevitable. Just like when they met at the park and Maryl had almost immediately taken Robin's hand. She had been fighting against a relationship with her mind, but she was beginning to see that her heart had known all along.

Just to see what it was like, Maryl tentatively opened her heart, her mind and her soul to a lifetime commitment with the woman at her feet. Something inside her mind shifted with an almost audible chime and for one agonizingly pure moment, her being expanded to include the universe. Her heart skipped a beat and then everything settled into a new configuration. Maryl took a deep breath and realized that she could feel Robin within herself. Somehow her heart now *included* Robin: not in addition to what was already there, but as an indistinguishable part of herself. The future spread out before her and every dream she'd ever entertained became possible.

Robin was The One. There was no longer any doubt. None of the other women she had ever thought she loved had ever felt this way. None of them had touched her so deeply or shared so fully. None had ever made the sacrifices Robin had or shown the patience Robin gave her routinely. Somehow, she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Robin was the one woman in all the world that she could love and trust until the end of time.

Why it had been so difficult to arrive at this moment was a mystery to her. Now that she had opened herself to a future with Robin it seemed ridiculous that she had not done it immediately. There were so many things to talk about, so many choices to be examined. One issue, however, she knew needed to be settled at once.

"I want the left side of the bed," she said clearly, her eyes on the horizon. She felt Robin turn

towards her in confusion and waited for her response.

"The left side?" Robin's voice was uncertain, but dripping with hope.

To avoid any misunderstandings later, Maryl explained. "If you stand at the foot of the bed and face the head, I want the left side."

"But, I always sleep on the left."

"Not anymore," she said firmly. She smiled as Robin hugged her hard enough to leave bruises.

"Okay," Robin conceded with tears in her voice. "But the left side is responsible for the phone and the alarm clock."

"Deal."

"And Rupert can't sleep with us."

Maryl neglected to mention that Rupert never slept on the bed when there were two people in it. "Will you explain that to him?"

"Yes."

Maryl's eyes filled with tears and she let them fall unchecked. "I'm going to hold you to fifty years, you know."

"It won't always be good, Maryl."

She looked into Robin's tear streaked face. "It'll be worth it." Robin pulled her closer and their lips met in a promise.

"Marry me," Robin whispered into her mouth.

Tears spilled out of Maryl's eyes. They blurred her vision, but she was no longer looking with her eyes. She was seeing through her heart.

Forty-two Weeks Later

Robin awoke, feeling rested and eager to start the day. Putting her arms above her head, she stretched to get all the kinks out. Her feet could feel pressure on the blankets and she opened her eyes expecting to see Rupert beside her on the bed. It was Maryl. She was sitting cross-legged in her birthday suit, staring. Robin smiled uncertainly. "Good morning."

"You're still here."

Robin glanced around the room for a clue, but none were obvious. "Shouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. Are you happy?"

Robin began to understand. She let a genuine, languid smile bloom on her face before answering. "I did not know that it was possible to be as happy as I am. I'm not leaving, baby. Not ever."

Maryl's smile came with tears and she crawled over to lay on Robin, small hands framing the angular face. "You're still here," she repeated in wonder.

Robin ran her hands down the length of smooth back above her and rested them on Maryl's ass. "I love you desperately. You'll need a court order to get rid of me."

After a long, slow, loving kiss, Maryl folded her arms across Robin's chest and put her chin on them. "Since you're going to stay, there's a couple of things I want to run by you."

Robin ran her fingers through the long blond hair and shifted her head so she could look into blue eyes. "I'm ready. Let's hear it."

"First, I want to spend all day in bed with you to celebrate my longest relationship ever."

Robin pretended to think it over. "I suppose I could live with that."

Maryl grinned. "Good answer."

"Next?"

"Okay." Maryl's eyes began to glitter with excitement. "I have this idea. You know that Janelle wants me to make her and Jerry a complete set of dinnerware for their wedding."

The pottery class had been a lot of fun, but it was Maryl who had turned out to have a knack for it. Actually, it was far more than a knack. She had a real gift and had been taking more classes and working with professional potters ever since. Robin's favorite piece was the large bowl on the coffee table that held all of the river stones Maryl had left for her almost a year before. "I remember."

"Well, Maureen and Shine called me the other day and they want a set, too."

Robin grinned for her lover. "That's great, honey."

"They want to pay me."

"That's a good thing, right?"

"Yeah." Maryl became serious. "My idea is that I'm thinking about doing it full-time. I think I can make a living at it. Maybe."

Robin thought it over quickly. They didn't really need Maryl's income. Between the two of them, they were saving almost as much as Maryl made towards the buying of a house. If Maryl quit working, their savings wouldn't grow as fast unless Maryl did well with the pottery. Considering how good she was, it seemed like a good bet. Even if she didn't, they could live well enough without the second income. It might take a little longer to save up the house money, but Robin wasn't in a real hurry for it anyway. "Where will you sell it?"

"There are a lot of craft stores around here. I could start there. I could even do some of the craft fairs and see how that works out. I'd need to get a kiln and a place to work of my own. It means quitting my job though. You'd have to support us until I get on my feet."

Robin nodded sagely. She wasn't really seeing a down side to any of this.

"We might have to use some of the house money to get me started."

"Okay."

Maryl looked surprised. "Okay? Just like that?"

Robin grinned. "Just like that."

"You don't even want to argue about it first?"

"Nope. I know how good a potter you are. In a couple of years I'll be able to retire and lay around eating bon bons and getting fat. Would you still love me if I were fat?"

"Sure. Would you love me if I were fat?"

Robin squeezed the round globes of Maryl's ass with a salacious leer. "Oh, yeah."

"Good. Because I want to have a baby with you."

"You do, huh?"

"Yes," Maryl nodded smugly. "Now."

Robin froze. "Now? But...how? Who?"

"Don't worry," Maryl laughed. "Your mother is handling it."

"My mother?" She heard the screech in her voice and could do nothing to stop it.

Maryl scooted up and placed a kiss on Robin's shocked lips. "Don't worry about a thing, sweetie. Your mother and I have it all worked out."

Robin sputtered for a moment and then took a deep calming breath. She had always wanted children and Maryl would be a great mother. That was not an issue. It was the fact that it was being decided without her input. She looked into Maryl's eyes and saw the hope and fear there. Suddenly she understood. She had a choice. Just not the control. This must be what it had been like for her brothers. Everything going along just fine and then suddenly there was going to be a baby. Whether it was true or not, they must have felt that they didn't have any control either. Especially once their mother got involved. She realized that she didn't have to be in control to be happy about it.

Robin rolled Maryl over and leaned down to lay her head on the flat belly. A sense of wonder began to invade her. "We're going to have a baby. I'm going to be a mommy."

Small hands began combing through Robin's hair and she smiled in perfect contentment. "We're going to be a family."

THE END

So ends my second story. Hope you enjoyed the ride.