

~ Rumors ~

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 rampant 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.

Note: There is Spanish spoken in this story. I do not speak Spanish. Oh sure, I can count to ten if I'm not interrupted and I'm pretty sure I can order eggs, but Lord knows how they'll be served to me. Since I don't speak Spanish and didn't want to ask any of the very straight manly men at my day job to help me out, I used a free on-line translation service. I was so proud of myself. What did I know? It *looked* like Spanish. So I submitted the story. Turns out my translations bore about the same relation to Spanish as an omelet does to eggs. (I seem to keep bringing up eggs. Maybe I'm ovulating.) Anyway, I bow down to Webwarrior for unscrambling my omelet of Spanish, and Bardeyes for sending me the translations and letting me work them into the story. *They rock.* Any errors, however, are still my own. For those of us who don't speak this beautiful language, I've put the translated English at the end of the story.

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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Chapter One

It wasn't her fault she was late. Her last client had been overdue in picking up his dog after she had finished grooming it and her entire schedule had been thrown off. Then there had been rush hour traffic to deal with; which, even in a mid-sized city like Edgewater, could try the patience of even the most virtuous. She pulled up to the chain link fence surrounding the auto yard just as an older, grizzled man began to drag the gate closed.

"Wait!" she cried. "Please! I'm just supposed to drop off my car."

"What's yer name?" he asked suspiciously.

"Hannah Reece. I was supposed to be here a half-hour ago, but my last client..."

"Pull up o'er there," he pointed towards the office with a growl. "I kin take yer keys, but I'm ina hurry."

Unsure if she was making a wise choice, but feeling committed to it already, Hannah drove to where he directed and locked up. She separated her car keys from her house keys as she walked back to the gate and handed them over. "Is there somewhere I can call a cab?"

He stuck her keys in his pocket and pointed down the street to a bar. Without another word he turned to lock the gate.

"Don't I need to do paperwork or something?"

"Work order's already started," he said. "We'll call ya when she's ready."

Hannah stood there in shock as he walked over to a pickup truck and drove away. The breeze created by his departure blew dirt into the air and made her cough. She looked wistfully through the fence to her car and wished she hadn't been so quick to leave it. With no closer alternatives, Hannah made her way down the street to The Sidewinder Bar. She had seen the bar too many times to count, but she had never actually been inside.

Bracing herself outside the door for what she was sure would be a bar straight out of a nightmare, Hannah took a deep breath and stepped into the cool dark. Her eyes adjusted quickly to an old-fashioned beer bar: clean, but frazzled around the edges. It wasn't bad at all. Most of the faces at the bar turned to see who had let in the light and Hannah dropped her eyes in the hope it would make her invisible.

She hated herself for being a wimp, but she made her way unobtrusively to the bar and tried to catch the bartender's eye. He didn't appear to be busy, but he took his time.

"Do you have a payphone?"

"It's out of order," he replied.

"I need to call a cab." She fought the sound of desperation in her voice. "Where's the next closest one?"

He looked thoughtful, then said, "You'd have to go back up on H Street to the Mini Mart on the corner of Esplanade." Hannah knew he was describing a twenty minute walk at least and her heart fell. "Or you can buy a drink," he grinned, "and *I'll* call you a cab."

She didn't find him at all amusing and if she hadn't needed a phone so bad she would have been tempted to walk out. "Light beer," she ordered.

He turned away and Hannah made a face at his back. Laughter halfway down the bar drew her eyes and she was surprised to realize that she knew that face. Not the name, but the face was one she had seen at many gay and lesbian events over the years. She was *very* butch: so butch that Hannah had thought her a man for some time. They ran in very different circles and did not seem to have close friends in common. The woman was quite tall, very lean and far more muscular than any woman Hannah had ever seen before. Now that she had a chance to see her up close she

could see that it was only at a distance that she could be taken for a man. Her face was almost pretty in bone structure and she had an engaging smile. She also had striking blond hair that was cut *very* short and framed her face like a halo of light. Hannah felt strangely disappointed to see the cigarettes sitting in front of her.

"You're such a jerk," the mysterious butch told the bartender.

Hannah watched in surprise.

"Man's gotta make a living," he retorted.

"Well, you're the only man I know who can make a living on one beer." Sarcasm dripped from her voice. "Call the lady a cab, Pete. Make your mother proud."

The teasing started in earnest with the bartender getting the worst of it from the other patrons as well. Hannah was embarrassed by the fuss and made sure to say 'Thank You' when he set her beer in front of her. He didn't answer, but he took her money quick enough. His next move was to grab an old-fashioned rotary phone and plunk it down on the bar in front of the mystery dyke. "If you care so much," he grumbled, "*you* call her a cab."

There wasn't much Hannah could do but watch as the woman made the call. "Fifteen minutes," she called to Hannah as she hung up and leaned over the bar to put the phone back.

"Thanks." She felt like she should introduce herself or something, but the blond went back to watching the news on the small TV above the bar. Having had their fun, everyone went back to what they had been at when she first walked in. She drank her beer quietly and tried not to start another scene. She couldn't help but wonder about the woman. She assumed that she had stuck up for her because she recognized her. Whatever her reason, Hannah was grateful.

When the cab arrived, Hannah jumped up and covertly glanced at the blond woman just in time to catch a wink. She smiled involuntarily and ran out into the bright light to catch her ride.

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"You're late?" Jay exclaimed as he leaned over to kiss her cheek. "And you've started drinking without us?"

"I have had the afternoon from hell," she sighed as she dropped onto his sofa. "I was supposed to drop my car off for its tune up at 4:30, but I couldn't get there till a few minutes after five because my last client decided to stop for pizza on his way home. The traffic was terrible and I got there just as they were locking the gate. I can only *hope* that the Neanderthal who took my keys isn't the one who'll work on my car. Then I had to buy a beer in order to get a cab..." Hannah ran out of steam mid-sentence. "Suffice it to say I'm ready to be pampered. Where's Freddie?"

"He called a few minutes ago and should be here any second. He had a last minute interview for

the stylist position. What would you like to drink?"

Hannah asked for beer since she had already started down that road and let herself get comfortable. She and Jay had a long history having gone to the local high school together. Jay had been short, round, near-sighted and the butt of a million jokes. He and Hannah had been friends in part because she was inclined to fight for the underdog, but it was mostly that Jay had a sweet heart and a deadly wit. After graduation, Jay had ridden a partial scholarship straight into law school. Years later, he came home ten inches taller with the body of a young god, contacts and a beautiful Latino lover on his arm. Hannah had not recognized him in the slightest and he took it as the greatest of compliments. Their friendship continued as if they had never been apart and his new lover, Freddie, instantly fit right in. Hannah loved his style: he was flashy, dramatic and had a lovely accent that made his excellent command of English a joy to hear. He kept them both from being too serious and they took turns keeping his feet on the ground.

Jay worked as a partner in a small firm specializing in civil cases and estate planning. On occasion he represented people in criminal cases, but he was very picky about his clients. If he were not completely convinced that they were innocent of the crime, he wouldn't fight it in court. Having been an underdog, he was committed to defending and protecting them. He had helped Hannah on several occasions in arranging her grandmother's affairs and keeping her business dealings in order.

Freddie was the proud owner of Frederico's, the most successful beauty salon in the county. He had 8 styling stations, 3 manicurists, 4 tanning booths and one woman who did nothing but hair removal. He, himself, did only the rich, the famous, the difficult and the few he called his *compañeros*. The rest of the time he played hostess. At different times he had considered adding tattoos and piercing to his available services, but he was a great believer in aura and worried that the residue of psychic pain would alter the ambience he strove to achieve and business would suffer.

The two of them together were her best friends and she spent a great deal of time in their company, especially since her last lover had left town so abruptly six months before.

"I told you I had invited someone to dinner, didn't I?"

Hannah looked over the back of the couch and nodded to Jay. "Who is it?"

"The new office manager in the small claims division at the Courthouse. She's only been in town for about six weeks and I don't think she knows anyone."

Hannah grinned at how obvious it all was. "How long did it take you to figure out she was family?"

"She asked me the second time we met," Jay shrugged. "I don't know her very well and Freddie's never met her so this is more in the way of an experiment than a blind date for you."

"But you did tell her I would be here?"

Jay half nodded and half shook his head. "More or less. I didn't want to commit you to anything so I was rather vague."

"Thanks."

Freddie breezed in just minutes later with his dark good looks. "*Ola, pellirola?*" He stopped to kiss Hannah's cheek before sliding into his lover's arms for a kiss. "*Ola, mi semental guapo.*"

One of the things Hannah admired most about the relationship her friends shared was how they said goodbye in the morning and welcome home at night. Regardless of their moods, or what was going on around them, the world took a backseat while they reestablished emotional intimacy. They did not seem to be aware of anything, or anybody, outside of their love for each other. She interrupted after a few minutes. "How did your interview go?" If she didn't remind them she was here, the welcome home could take forever and she didn't want to have to explain *that* to Jay's guest.

Freddie looked pleased with himself as he joined her on the couch and judging from the glassy look of Jay's eyes, he had every right to be. "Just another refugee from Quickie Cuts with far more imagination than skill. It would be better for everyone if she switched to cutting grass."

"You didn't tell her that, did you?" Sometimes Freddie was consumed by his own wit and inadvertently hurt people's feelings.

"Give me *some* credit," he sniffed. "I did mention landscaping once, but it was relevant. You need a trim," he said abruptly. "It's been weeks and it's not laying right around your face."

Hannah had a love/hate relationship with her hair. Everyone else loved her bright red hair. She hated it. Curling wildly was the only thing it was good at and she had grown up wishing for long, straight hair. Any color at all would do, even red-provided it was long and straight. Instead she was stuck with a tangled mess. It was hard to brush and had a mind of its own.

Freddie's fingers were tugging and shaping at her temples. "You just need a little off right here."

"Maybe I can come in on Saturday."

The doorbell rang and Freddie excitedly jumped up to get it. "Welcome? Welcome? You must be Jill."

Hannah stood up as a slender, attractive woman in her mid to late thirties came inside. She had a moment to study her as Jay came out of the kitchen to greet her. *Yikes? She's pretty? But there's nothing girlish about her. She's definitely a woman. And that's the hair I've always wanted. It's hard to say if it's brown or blond, but it looks silky smooth. I never would have guessed she's a lesbian.*

"Hannah," Jay said smoothly. "This is Jill Wilson. Jill, this is Hannah Reece. She owns her own

very successful dog grooming business."

"Hello, Jill." Hannah reached out and shook hands. *Such lovely hands. Very feminine.* "It's nice to meet you."

Jill smiled warmly. "Jay didn't mention how pretty you were."

"To tell the truth, I think we all look the same to him. It's a miracle he can tell us apart."

"I don't have to listen to this," Jay snorted. "Would you like something to drink, Jill?"

In minutes they were all seated in the living room, drinks in hand and getting to know each other.

"You're new here, aren't you?" Freddie asked.

"I moved here about two months ago from San Diego."

"Why here?" Hannah could feel herself beginning to hope that she would find an attraction to Jill.

"I have asthma and I had constant problems with it down there. I decided to find someplace a little more rural to live in hopes that my health would improve. This job was listed on a website and when I came up for the interview I looked around and decided that this was what I was looking for."

Hannah liked Jill's voice and her graceful movements. "Jay said that you're the office manager in the small claims division. How did you get into that line of work?"

"I have a Masters in Business Administration. In San Diego I was managing Public Relations for a large retail franchise so this is a step down for me, but I'm hoping that with a little experience I'll be able to move up. Helping to run a city of this size could be very interesting." Jill grinned. "Maybe I'll even be Mayor someday."

Unsure where it was coming from, Hannah shrugged off the discomfort she felt and laughed along with every one else.

"So, you're a dog groomer?" Jill asked.

"Yes."

"She's the best in town," Freddie said brightly.

"Really? How did you get started?"

Hannah explained. "I got into it by accident really. I started out as a hairdresser. This one particular day we had a walk-in whose little Yorkie had been butchered by her six-year-old son.

She was desperate because she couldn't get an appointment with her regular groomer and she begged us to help her. No one else was willing to work on a dog, but he was so cute and you could tell he was just humiliated by how he looked. So I trimmed him up and he actually looked pretty good. After that I read some books and volunteered at the animal shelter on Saturdays, then got into a training class and got a certificate. I like it a lot better than hair styling. With a little help from my grandmother I started my own business and here I am."

Jill looked fascinated. "Do you still volunteer at the shelter?"

Hannah shook her head. "They bring me two dogs every Monday morning and I do them for free. I just don't have the time or energy for more, but it helps the dogs find homes and it makes me feel good."

"Is the money good in your line of work?"

Hannah felt a little uneasy at the inquiry. "I'll probably never drive a new Corvette or vacation in the South of France, but I do pretty well."

Jill looked as if she had just realized the rudeness of her query. "I'm sorry. That was a really personal question."

Jay and Freddie were both watching her as if to see what she would do. "That's okay. The truth is, if it didn't pay enough I'd be doing something else. Lucky for me it does and I really love the work. That's even more important to me."

"That's great," Jill said with enthusiasm. "There are people at work who have dogs. Maybe I can spread the word for you. What's the name of your business?"

It still made her want to laugh just saying it. "Doggie Styles." Jill looked a little disapproving and Hannah could feel the air in the room cool. "I know it's not PC, but my grandmother thought it up. She has an irreverent streak and I'm afraid I inherited it from her."

"It's a perfect name," Freddie laughed.

"When I came home after passing the bar exam I looked Hannah up first thing. I pulled up to her house and saw that sign..." Jay chuckled. "I almost ran out and got myself a dog."

"It sounds like a sex club," Jill said with a slight smile. "Doesn't it ever cause you problems? I would think there would be people who take offense at the name."

"There are," Hannah admitted. "Mostly when I first opened. Every now and then I'll get a phone call from someone who has no sense of humor. I just hang up on them. The worst thing that happened was shortly after I opened for business. I was just opening up for the day and a drug task force came busting in. Seems that someone called their hotline and swore that I was running a major drug ring out of my shop. They spent most of the day tearing my house apart and questioning me."

"If you started out as a hairdresser, did you work with Fred?"

"Who? Oh, *Freddie!*" Hannah almost started laughing. "No, we've never worked together."

"We should," Freddie inserted playfully. "We would have so much fun."

"We'd never get anything done," Hannah chuckled.

The conversation became a little less focused and in short time, dinner was served. Jill joined in freely and Hannah began to enjoy her presence. Jill had beautiful brown eyes and perfect skin. Her mouth was a little tight, but she had a graceful body; slender and feminine. Hannah's attraction was more a mental exercise at this point than anything else, but that was more than she had allowed herself to feel for some time. She knew that sometimes first impressions were more likely to be shaped by personal baggage than by the other person's manner and bearing. Maybe she should give Jill a chance. Maybe if they got to know each other a little better it could develop into a romance. At the very least, Hannah thought they might make good friends.

They played Trivial Pursuit after dinner and Jill won handily. She seemed to have a superior glint in her eye, but Hannah had to admit she had earned the right. Hannah, Jay and Freddie were no slouches when it came to trivia, so for Jill to beat them was a sure sign that she was quite intelligent. Hannah had to admit that in the same situation, she herself would have been doing a victory dance on the coffee table. By comparison, Jill was a model of self-restraint and sportsmanship.

A short time later, Jill took her leave and Hannah stood up to help clean up after their dinner.

"What did you think?" Freddie asked as soon as the front door closed.

Hannah shrugged as casually as she was able. "I liked her. She's smart and pretty, and she seems very nice."

"Hmpf."

Turning to look at the handsome Latino man, she raised her eyebrows. "What does that mean? Didn't you like her?"

"I suppose."

His diffident response was quite unusual. "But?"

"I don't know," he said airily. "Just something..."

Hannah looked to Jay. "What about you?"

"I thought she was nice."

If both of them were hesitant, it meant something. But it just made Hannah feel defensive on Jill's behalf. "She was perfectly charming. And you have to admit that she was very gracious about winning the game. It's hard to meet new people and I thought she handled herself very well."

"True," Jay conceded. "Should I tell her that you're interested in seeing her again?"

Hannah wondered if she had been manipulated into this very thing. Even if she was, she felt that she had to go through with it. "Sure. I'd like to get to know her better."

Freddie's eyebrows rose.

"What?" Hannah demanded.

"*Nada*," Freddie said quickly. "You are right. She was very nice. You could do a lot worse."

"Right." Now she was feeling a little frustrated and she didn't understand it. Hannah glanced at the clock. "You know, it's still early. I think I'll swing by and see Nana before I go home. Which one of you is going to loan me a car?"

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Up until seven years prior, Hannah and her grandmother had shared the same house. It was an easy, comfortable relationship for both of them. At sixty-seven years of age, arthritis finally made independent living impossible for her Nana. Hannah was more than willing to make any and all sacrifices necessary to keep her grandmother at home, but her Nana had other plans. With Jay's help, the house was transferred into Hannah's name with the stipulation that she would help pay the monthly fee for a room in a residential care home. Technically, Hannah was not paying for the house, but the exchange of funds made accepting the gift more palatable.

A great deal of care went into choosing where Nana would live. The Murdock's were a very nice couple in their late forties who had six rooms available for residents. Mrs. Murdock was a registered nurse and her husband was retired military. After meeting several times, Nana was accepted into their home. They charged a little more for the privilege of staying there, but the care they provided was the best. Nana was happy there, which was what Hannah thought most important.

After a few months, Nana mentioned in passing how difficult it was for the Murdock's to get time away for themselves and Hannah approached them with an offer. For a slight discount on the monthly fee, Hannah would come to the house early on Sunday mornings and cover for them until after lunch. This gave the Murdock's the freedom to go to church together and spend a little time alone. Over time, this expanded to include the occasional evening out and, sometimes, in the case of emergencies.

Hannah continued to pay the same amount to her grandmother, but some of it now found its way

into Nana's pocket. In truth, Hannah engineered the arrangement because it ensured that she still got to spend time with her grandmother. They sometimes did other things together as well, but Sunday mornings made Hannah feel as though she were giving back some of the care that her grandmother had given to her.

Nana was in bed reading James Patterson's latest novel when Hannah peeked into her room. "Hi."

Smiling broadly, Nana lay her book down and gestured for her to enter. "Well, hello, dear. What brings you by this evening?"

"Nothing. I just had dinner with Jay and Freddie. I thought I might have time to see you before I went home."

Nana patted the bed in invitation. "How are the boys doing?"

Hannah sat down with a smile. "Handsome as ever." She reached out to smooth her grandmother's grey hair. "Looks like it might be just about time to get Freddie to trim this up for you."

"Soon," Nana agreed. "Did you get that water heater fixed?"

"Yeah. It took two days for the guy to show up, but it was only an old wire. He was there all of ten minutes, but it works fine now."

Nana concentrated for a moment. "And your car?"

"I dropped it off after work." She shook her head in wry amusement. "You would have had a field day with the guy I gave the keys to. What a jerk. I just hope he's not the one who's going to work on it."

Frowning, Nana asked, "What did he do?"

"Nothing really. I was running a little late and he was kind of short with me. I ended up having to buy a beer in a bar down the street in order to call a cab. I seem to remember a lot more payphones when I was little. There don't seem to be as many of them around anymore."

Nana snorted in disgust. "It's those cell phones. Everyone's got a payphone in their pocket nowadays. Have you seen those new things that people wear on their ears?"

"Yeah."

"I hate those things," she said with a scowl. "You can't tell if people are talking to you, to their phones, or to the voices in their heads. It used to be a lot easier to spot the crazies. Not anymore."

Hannah was grinning. She loved this old woman like mad. "I agree."

Nana's face relaxed and she smiled. "How about you, dear? How are you doing?"

"I'm okay." She hesitated a moment and decided to tell all. "I met a woman tonight at dinner."

"Do tell."

"Well, she works at the Courthouse. She's a little bit older than me and she's pretty. Smart, too. Jay invited her to dinner because she's new to the area and she's like us."

"Do you like her?"

Hannah shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know yet. Kind of. It's a little soon to tell. I'm thinking of seeing her again. If nothing else, maybe we can be friends."

"That's nice, dear. What's her name?"

"Jill Wilson."

"It's a good name. I hope things work out. You deserve a nice girl to love."

"Thanks, Nana." Hannah sighed. "I only stopped by for a minute. I left work so fast today I didn't get a chance to clean up. I'd rather do it tonight than get up early tomorrow to do it, so I'd probably better get going."

"You're not walking," Nana said with concern.

"No. Freddie loaned me his car until mine is ready."

"All right then. You drive carefully and give Cricket kisses for me."

Hannah leaned over for a hug and a goodnight kiss. "I will, Nana."

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Cricket was barking excitedly as Hannah unlocked the front door. He didn't like being left alone and was always a little hyper when she returned. As soon as she opened the door, he was jumping in front of her, anxiously trying to get the attention he wanted. Hannah laughed at his antics. "Easy, boy. I'm home. Just let me put my things down."

Locking the door behind her, she set her pocketbook on an end table and tossed her sweater on the sofa. She caught Cricket on the next bounce and giggled as he kissed her face lavishly.

"Yeah, I missed you, too."

Cricket was a five-year-old Welsh Terrier. As the runt of the litter, he was too small to be a show dog, but he was otherwise perfect to his breed. He might be almost three inches too short and six

pounds too light, but to Hannah, he was exactly right. He had the personality in spades and vitality to spare. Most importantly, his love was pure and generous.

"I love you, too, buddy," she crooned as he began to calm. "Anything good on Animal Planet today? Did you leave me any little presents?"

It was rare that he had accidents anymore, but if left too long alone, he might feel justified in expressing his displeasure. Not today though. Hannah put him down when he began to wriggle and he ran off to find a toy. Kicking off her shoes in favor of slippers, Hannah headed out to her shop.

Over time, she had learned that it paid off to keep her space as clean as she could during the day. It made final clean-up easier and made her shop look more professional. It only took her 40 minutes to have everything clean and stocked for the next day.

After a long bath, during which Cricket killed a stuffed duck, Hannah made sure the house was locked tight and went to bed. Cricket curled up on the pillow next to her with a sigh and Hannah ruffled his ears affectionately. Closing her eyes, she thought of Jill, remembering her eyes and her smile.

But, it was a muscular blond with a saucy wink that peeked in on her as she fell asleep.

Chapter Two

"This would be a whole lot easier if I had three hands." The big dog's foot jerked away again. "Or a stun gun. Come on, Pookie. Only three more to go and it'll be all over."

Hannah used her weight to pin the dog more firmly and wrestled the paw into place. She suspected the big dog didn't really mind having her nails trimmed; she just liked the game. Just as Hannah would get the clippers in place, Pookie would yank her paw back. It was hard to get mad at the dog for the reflex, but it did get frustrating.

"My God. What kind of dog is that?"

Hannah glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "Hi, Jill. Give me a minute to finish this and then I can talk."

"All right."

Determined to get this over with, Hannah put some muscle into it. *Jay must have run straight to*

the Courthouse this morning, she thought with a mental sigh. I thought maybe she'd call or something. What the hell did he say to her?

Pookie got in three successful jerks on the last nail, but it was finally finished. Hannah patted her on the head and pushed her butt end off the table. "There you go, girl. On your feet now."

With slow, deliberate movements, Pookie dragged the rest of herself off the table and stood up. Hannah was pretty sure the big dog weighed more than she did. Scratching behind her ears, she said, "See now, that wasn't so bad. I don't know why you make such a big deal out of it. It's not like I ever hurt you, you big baby. Go on. Pick a spot and lay down till your dad gets here."

Pookie shook herself ponderously and wandered over by the storage closet. She dropped down on the oversized pillow placed there for that purpose and let out a sigh.

Hannah turned to Jill with a smile. "So, hello."

Jill was still looking at the big dog. "What exactly is that?"

"Pookie's a bull mastiff mix."

Jill's elegant eyebrows rose. "Pookie?"

Hannah held her hands up with a laugh. "Don't blame me. I didn't name her."

Jill looked at the dog with uncertainty. "What is she mixed with?"

"Bear."

This got an odd look. "Dogs and bears are not genetically compatible for breeding."

Does she think I'm an idiot? "Tell that to Pookie."

Jill finally smiled. "You have a point." She looked Hannah up and down with approval. "How are you? I hope you don't mind that I dropped by."

"Not at all." Hannah grabbed a rag and spray disinfectant and swiped the table clean. "What brings you by today?"

"I came to see you. I had a very nice time last night and I was hoping we might be able to make a date to see each other again."

"Sure," Hannah said with a grin. "I'm free on Saturday night. Does that work for you?"

"Yes, it does. Do you like Mexican food?"

"Very much."

"Six-thirty?"

"Perfect. Shall I pick you up?"

Hannah grabbed a broom and nodded. "I'd like that."

"Okay then," Jill smiled with accomplishment. There was a moment of silence that threatened to become uncomfortable and then Jill straightened. "I'd best be getting back to work."

"Thanks for coming by, Jill. I'll see you Saturday night."

"Bye."

When the door closed, Hannah let out a breath. "Okay. That was a little strange." She swept the floor briskly as she thought about it. Except for the odd look or comment, Jill seemed to be a perfectly nice woman. Hannah did like her, in a way, but there just didn't seem to be any spark between them. Still, she knew that sometimes feelings took a little longer to develop with some people. That must be the case here. Time would tell, she supposed.

She was running a little ahead of schedule, but that was always a good thing. Hannah opened a drying cage and let a small mixed breed dog out to stretch his legs. The terrier shook himself and went to investigate Pookie. Hannah always thought it funny that terriers didn't seem to know how small they were compared to other dogs. This was a trait Cricket had as well.

After a few minutes, she collected the mangy looking mutt and began the work of making him look like a real dog.

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Freddie breezed in mid-afternoon. He showed up almost every day just to visit and Hannah appreciated it. Owners came and went, but it was nice to actually have a conversation with someone. Especially someone who didn't require her undivided attention. Freddie was helpful, too. He would occasionally answer the phone or give a dog a bath, which took some of the pressure off of Hannah on her busier days.

"Ola!"

"Hey, Freddie. How's it shakin'?"

"Pretty loose." He stopped to fuss over the Bichon she was trimming. "Aren't you the pretty one? I love these little powder puff dogs. Maybe I'll make Jay get me one."

"They require lots of love and attention," Hannah felt obligated to point out.

Freddie lost interest in a heartbeat. "Maybe not." Throwing himself into a chair, he studied

Hannah with dark eyes. "Am I to understand that you have a date?"

Hannah straightened. "What did Jay do? Run right over there first thing this morning and tell her to ask me out?"

Expressive eyebrows rose in surprise. "Ooo. Testy much?" He waved off her answer with one graceful hand. "Actually, he did not. He called me a few minutes ago and said he had just seen her. Apparently she had already taken the bull by the horns."

"That's one way to put it."

Freddie cocked his head to one side. "You don't want to go out with her?"

Hannah sighed. "That's not it. I don't know what's wrong with me. She came by the shop earlier and asked me out. She was very nice."

"But you don't feel...*it*."

"Not yet," she said with another sigh. "But, I do like her. Kind of."

"I understand," he said knowingly. "She is very much yes-and-no at the same time. Maybe she will become a yes in time."

"I hope so. Maybe it's just that she's nervous about making new friends. I would be. I'll give it some time and see if she relaxes. Sometimes you just don't hit it off with people right away and later you become great friends."

"Very true."

Hannah let it go. Fussing now wasn't going to answer any questions. "Any luck with the stylist position?"

"Not yet. I have a few more interviews later this week."

They chatted about trivial things for a while and Freddie picked up the phone when it rang.

"Doggy Styles. How may I help you?"

He was quiet for a moment and then covered the receiver with his hand. "Your car is ready."

Hannah considered the rest of her day. "I can't make it before closing today. What time do they open in the morning?"

Freddie asked and covered the phone again. "Someone will be there at seven, but he says it will cost five dollars to store your car over night." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I do not like this man."

Hannah knew exactly who he was talking about. "Can't be helped. Tell him I'll be in before seven-thirty."

Freddie relayed the information and hung up as if the phone had contracted a disease. "What an unpleasant fellow."

Hannah laughed. "You should see him in person. It only gets worse."

"Thank you, no. There is only so much a man of my taste and breeding should be required to endure."

Hannah laughed even harder.

~***~

After dropping Freddie's car off at his home, Hannah caught a ride to the auto shop with Jay. Leaving a kiss on his cheek for helping her out, she walked into the office and came face to face with the blond woman from the bar.

"Good morning."

The smiling face was open and friendly and Hannah smiled back in reflex. "Good morning," she responded. "I'm here to pick up my car."

"I know. I worked on it." Hannah breathed a sigh of relief which prompted a short laugh from the woman. "We get that a lot. I'm Kelly Lowell."

Hannah reached out to take the large, warm hand. "Hannah Reece. I didn't mean to be so obvious."

"That's all right. We don't let Merle work on the cars anymore. His tool of choice is a hammer. It's bad for business."

"Well, I appreciate that," Hannah grinned.

Kelly pulled a few papers from under the counter and lay them out. "Let me show you what I did."

Hannah moved closer to see the papers.

"You requested a tune up," Kelly said evenly. "Points, plugs, oil and filter changes, timing belt; that sort of thing."

"Yes."

"Okay. That's what we're going to charge you for. But, I did a little more than that."

Hannah looked up nervously.

"Don't worry," Kelly said quickly. "It's just...I've seen you around. We're *family*, and family looks out for each other. I went over your car pretty thoroughly. Changed some belts and hoses that were looking worn. Rotated the brakes and bled the lines. Recharged your AC. Checked your alignment. Changed the gasket on your oil pan. Stuff that *should* be part of a good tune up. I do it all the time for *family* members."

Hannah could hardly believe what she was hearing. "But...shouldn't I at least owe you for parts or something?"

"Don't worry about it. I like to think of it as part of the advertising budget. Word-of-mouth is the best thing there is for drumming up new business, so if you're happy with the job I did, spread the word." She turned a piece of paper for Hannah to look at. "Your brakes are okay for now, but you're going to need to get some new parts in there in a couple of months. It's not something to worry about. Just be aware of it. This is an estimate of what it will cost when you decide to do it. Feel free to shop around for a better price. It won't hurt my feelings. And you need to pay attention to oil changes. I put one of those little stickers in the window that tells you when to come in. Changing the oil and checking the fluids is the number one thing you can do to prolong the life of your car. Other than that, it's in pretty good shape. Do you have any questions?"

Hannah shook her head in disbelief. "I don't think I've ever had a mechanic give me so much information. At least not that I could understand."

Kelly chuckled wryly. "All part of the service here at Edgewater Auto."

"Somehow I doubt that's true of your boss." Hannah grinned at the blush on the buff mechanic's face and pulled out her checkbook. Considering all that had been done for her car, it was a ridiculously low price to pay, but she wasn't going to argue the point.

Once the bill was settled and the paperwork taken care of, Hannah followed the tall woman out to her car. It had obviously been washed and waxed. She gave a look to Kelly that had the taller woman shuffling her feet. "It looks great. Thank you."

"Like I said, no problem."

"Well, I appreciate all you did and I will spread the word."

"Thanks."

Hannah unlocked the door and opened it. Tossing her pocketbook onto the passenger seat, she turned at the sound of a throat clearing.

"So." Kelly's hands were deep in her pockets and her shoulders were hunching in on herself. "I

was wondering, if sometime, maybe we could go out for coffee. Or something. If you ever want to."

Hannah instantly felt bad because she knew she was going to say no and it seemed so heartless after what Kelly had done for her car.

"You can say no," Kelly added quickly, as if recognizing the inevitable rejection. "And don't think I did the extra stuff to your car to try to guilt you into it. I wouldn't do that."

"It's not that," Hannah said slowly. She could see that in spite of Kelly's physical strength and air of confidence that the asking had been hard. "I'm already seeing someone."

"Oh." Kelly seemed to deflate a bit, then straighten. It was as though she was back on solid ground. "I understand. In fact, I respect you for telling me. Some women date multiples until they decide to settle down. I've never really trusted women like that. I hope things work out for you. Really."

They might be so different that even a simple friendship would seem unlikely, but Hannah suddenly wished she had said yes. "If it doesn't, maybe you could ask me again sometime."

Kelly's smile made the morning seem even brighter. "I'll do that. And I'll work on my delivery. That was pretty pathetic."

Hannah had to laugh. "Well, it's not the worst I've ever heard."

"At least I have that thought to console myself with," Kelly teased. She took a business card from her breast pocket and wrote on the back. "If you ever have a problem with your car, just give me a call, okay?"

Hannah took the card and glanced at it before slipping it into her back pocket. "I will, thanks. And thanks for in the bar the other day."

Kelly waved it off. "That was nothing."

"It was something to me," Hannah insisted. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Kelly said with a nod. "Like I said, we're family and we should look out for each other." Kelly's hands went back in her pockets and she began to back up. "I should let you go. I'll see you around."

Hannah was starting to like this woman. "If you do, say hi."

Another killer smile lit up the day. "Thanks, I will."

Hannah watched the tall butch walk away and realized she was staring at her butt. Shaking herself out of it, she got in her car and headed for work.

Chapter Three

Hannah was in her robe trying to make sense out of her hair when the doorbell rang. She checked the clock on the way to the door and saw that she still had almost 40 minutes before her date. Peeking through the peephole, she saw Jill on the doorstep.

"Damn," she hissed before opening the door. "Hi, Jill. I didn't expect you until 6:30."

"I thought we agreed on 6," Jill frowned. "We have reservations at Los Taqueros at 6:30."

Hannah *knew* they had decided on 6:30, but it was too late to argue about it. "Just give me 15 minutes and I'll be ready."

A calculating look crossed Jill's face followed by a knowing grin. "I could always cancel our reservations..."

Hannah played dumb. "It's not a problem. I'll be ready in a flash." She left Jill in the living room and closed the bedroom door. Unsure about Jill, she slowly locked it to hide the telltale click. She had originally decided to wear a dress, but Jill's look made her self-conscious. She pulled out what she thought of as her Jury Duty outfit and put it on. She hoped that it would send a message.

In less than ten minutes she was ready to go. She came out into the living room and found Jill rearranging photographs and candles on the coffee table. Two of the pictures were from the bookcase.

"Doesn't that look good?" Jill said proudly.

Hannah could see that it did look better, but the fact that it had been done at all was disturbing. She knew that Jill was trying to be helpful, but she was afraid to open her mouth. A smile seemed to be all Jill needed.

"You look nice," Jill added. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes." She felt like there were at least a dozen things she had forgotten, but she didn't have time to figure them out. "You be a good boy," she told Cricket on the way out. As soon as the door closed he barked and Jill laughed.

"He sounds upset."

"He's confused," Hannah said in his defense. "I take him with me almost everywhere, so when I leave him home he thinks he's in trouble."

"I appreciate that you didn't bring him. I'm kind of neurotic about my car." She unlocked the passenger door of her classic green Mustang and held it open. "It'll be awhile before I'll be able to afford another car like this so I'm trying to keep this one in as good a condition as I can."

Hannah felt like her dog had just been criticized. It was tempting to criticize the car in return. It smelled old and the doors creaked, but she had to admit that it *looked* good. She hid a smile when Jill started the engine and it promptly died.

"It's rather spoiled," Jill explained as she restarted the car. "High performance cars like this require a lot of maintenance and I haven't found a mechanic I trust yet."

Hannah remembered Kelly explaining all the work she had done and wondered what she would have to say about Jill's car. "Have you looked into Edgewater Auto? I took my car there recently and they did a great job. In fact, there's a lesbian on staff there and she did all the work on mine."

"I'd rather find someone who specializes in restoring the classics, preferably a man. I find that they know more and do a better job." Jill grinned. "On cars, at any rate."

Hannah found this strange. "I usually feel like I've been overcharged by men."

"Really. I guess that's why it's so important to find the *right* mechanic."

Hannah saw no point in continuing this exchange. "You're probably right."

The conversation moved onto more neutral ground over dinner. Hannah was much more comfortable trading memories of good times and places visited. Jill had a knack for telling stories and she kept Hannah in stitches. Her special skill seemed to be mimicry. Hannah could almost see the people Jill spoke of just by the voice she used. When she spoke of meeting Jay for the first time and repeated their conversation, Hannah had gooseflesh at the accuracy in her portrayal of Jay's voice. She had his intonation and inflections down pat.

"How did you learn to copy people's voices?" she asked over her fried ice cream.

"I don't know," Jill admitted. "I guess I was just born with it. I've come to believe that everyone is born with a gift and this one is mine. I'm good with accents, too. I don't even have to work at it. If I talk to someone for a few minutes I can just do it."

"It's a great gift. I wish I had one."

"Every one has a gift," Jill insisted. "Some people have obvious gifts like beauty or strength and some have gifts that manifest through a talent or skill, like music or art. But I think most people have gifts that aren't so obvious. Sometimes those gifts are more like a curse."

"Like what?"

"Like always making the wrong decisions," Jill shrugged. "There are a lot of people out there who just can't do anything right. I would have to work at it and so would you, but lots of folks don't."

"That doesn't sound like a gift anyone would want."

"True," Jill agreed with humor. "There are people out there who can put a fussy baby to sleep just by picking it up. Some people are completely unnoticeable and others seem to be known by people they haven't even met yet. I've known people who *never* get lost and I used to know a man who never forgot a name. I even met a woman once who always knew where north was. You could blindfold her and spin her in circles till she couldn't stand, but she could point north without hesitation. Some people know when they're being lied to and others can tell you outrageous lies and make you believe it."

"I've met a few of those," Hannah grinned.

"We all have," Jill laughed.

"So, what's my gift?"

"I don't know you well enough to say. You'd be a better judge of that than I."

Hannah tried to look at herself objectively, but didn't see anything obvious. "I guess I have one of those obscure gifts. The only thing I can think of is that I've never been bitten by any of the dogs I groom."

"Is that a common occupational hazard?"

"It is for some," Hannah said. "Even the best dogs can react badly when they are stressed or scared. So far, I've been lucky. Tell me about San Diego? I've never been there."

~***~

Sunday morning after breakfast, Hannah sat out on the Murdock's deck with her grandmother to enjoy the sunshine. The other residents were playing cards, except for Mr. Blackney who was watching a baseball game.

"Is everything all right with you, dear?"

Hannah gave her grandmother a smile. "Yeah. I'm okay."

"You seem a little...off."

"To be honest, I'm a little tired. I haven't been sleeping well. I just can't seem to get my head to shut off at night. I spend hours just thinking about things."

"You get that from me."

Hannah chuckled. "Gee, thanks."

Nana reached out to pat Hannah's arm. "You're welcome, dear. Now, what is it that troubles you?"

Hannah sighed. "It doesn't seem to be any one thing. My brain just starts going and jumps from one thing to another until I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Hmm. Nothing bad is happening?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. This just happens to me now and then."

"Why don't you take a nap?"

"I couldn't."

"Why ever not? Even the Murdock's sleep. I'll wake you if there is need."

Hannah thought about it. What harm could be in it? As long as she stayed close to everyone, it shouldn't make any difference whether she was awake or not. "You'll wake me if anyone needs help?"

"Yes, honey. Now, close your eyes for a while and at least rest."

It didn't take long. Hannah fell asleep with the feel of her grandmother smoothing her unruly hair.

Hannah felt much better after her nap. She made lunch for the residents and stayed for awhile to visit with the Murdock's after they got home from church. On the way home, she stopped at Riverside Park to let Cricket chase the ducks and spent a few minutes visiting with a guy she'd gone to school with. They had never been particularly close, but it was nice to visit.

At home, Hannah did a little house cleaning and then worked on the accounts for the shop. When she'd first started her business, balancing the books had intimidated her, but after taking a course at the Junior College, it came much easier to her. In fact, it was down right comforting now. She could see exactly where she was financially and it gave her peace of mind.

Making herself a tuna casserole for dinner, Hannah curled up on the couch with Cricket and mindlessly watched television until bedtime. Crawling between the covers, she *knew* that she wouldn't spend half the night fussing. At some point during the day, she had re-connected with herself. Hannah promised herself that she would try to do that more often.

~***~

The week started off uncomplicated. Freddie finally hired a woman to fill the station at the salon and he seemed a bit less frazzled in general. Of course, this did nothing to inhibit the overall flamboyance that was such an integral part of his charm. Jay was his usual calm and soothing self and Nana's doctor had her on a new medication that seemed to be helping with the pain and discomfort of her arthritis. Hannah's clients were on time and their dogs were well-behaved and cooperative. Everything was smooth as silk.

Until Wednesday night.

After work, Hannah took Cricket with her to go grocery shopping. He had to wait in the car, but Hannah knew he'd rather wait for her there than stay at home. She parked in the shade of a tree and left the windows cracked for him. It wasn't hot in the evenings, but she knew well how car windows seemed to magnify the sun's rays and she didn't want him to be uncomfortable.

She was running low on food stuffs, so Hannah took her time and stocked up. She liked shopping in general, but shopping for food was more of a chore for her than anything else. After loading everything in the trunk, Hannah slid into the driver's seat, gave Cricket a kiss and started the car.

At least, she tried to. There was a strange buzzing sound and then nothing. Shocked, she tried again and the same thing happened.

"Oh, crap."

Another try with the same result and Hannah lowered her forehead to the steering wheel. "This is not happening, damn it. Come on!"

It still wouldn't start. Hannah took a deep breath and looked at Cricket. "If this is your fault, I'm taking away all of your toys for a week."

Cricket looked at her and panted happily.

"That's right. Play dumb." She took another deep breath and tried to calm herself. "Okay. I can call the guys and they'll come get me, but that doesn't get my car home. Of course, getting it home doesn't mean it's fixed, but it's a place to start."

Hannah considered the situation for a moment and remembered the card Kelly had given her. She had tossed it in the glove box and Hannah decided it was only appropriate that she call her for help. Kelly must have missed something.

It took a few minutes to find the little square of paper, but when Hannah had it in hand, she went back to the store to use the payphone. "I need to get myself a cellphone," she grumbled as she put in her money and punched in the handwritten number on the back.

"Hello."

Hannah bit her lip and resigned herself. "Kelly?"

"Yeah?"

"This is Hannah."

"Well, hi." She sounded surprised. "How are you?"

Hannah sighed and leaned against the wall, one hand playing with the phone cord. "I'm doing pretty well, but I seem to have a problem."

Kelly's voice deepened. "What's wrong?"

"My car won't start."

"Uh oh. Where are you?"

"I'm at Larry's Food Mart. It's been running just fine, but I came out of the store and when I turned the key, nothing happened."

"All right. I can be there in ten minutes."

This was what she wanted, but Hannah couldn't help feeling bad for calling her out. It was almost as if she felt that the car not starting was her own fault. "You don't mind?"

"Absolutely not. I'm on my way out the door right now. Just hold tight, Hannah. I'll be right there and I'll get it straightened out, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Kelly."

"No problem at all."

Hannah spent the whole ten minutes fussing about it. She felt bad for making Kelly come out even if it was kind of Kelly's fault. Well, she wasn't positive it was Kelly's fault, but it wasn't Hannah's fault either. She tried to start it again and it still sat there like a lump. It was frustrating that she'd spent the money to prevent problems like this and was now sitting there while ice cream melted in her trunk.

Then there was the fact that Kelly was coming. The woman had asked her out the last time they'd spoken and Hannah still felt funny about turning her down. It was going to be awkward, she just knew it. If she was going to see her again, she didn't want it to be because she needed rescuing.

And there she was. Kelly was dressed in blue jeans and a yellow T-shirt that said 'Come to the dark side - We have cookies'. The tall woman did not look at all put out about having to be there.

Hannah slid out of her car and didn't know what to do with her hands. "I'm sorry about calling you."

Kelly smiled. "You shouldn't be. Looks like I missed something. Let's see what we can do to fix this." She put her hands on her hips and looked thoughtful. "Okay. Let's start with something simple. Try taking the transmission out of neutral and then putting it back in."

Hannah kept Cricket from getting out of the car with one hand as she got back in. Moving the shift lever out of park, she put it back in firmly.

"Now, try starting it."

Again, there was that strange sound and nothing.

Kelly grinned. "Got it." She moved to the front of the car, rubbed her hands together as if preparing to do magic and placed them on the hood. "Hang on," she warned with a cocky grin. Using her bulk, she pushed down on the car, bouncing it a few times. "Try it now."

To Hannah's utter astonishment, it started right up. She stuck her head out the window. "How did you do that?"

Kelly laughed and moved closer, one hip resting on Hannah's car. "The solenoid on your starter has a flat spot. See, there's this washer inside that sometimes gets a flat spot on one edge. When you shake the car it moves that washer just enough that it will work."

Hannah was still stunned at how easily Kelly had corrected the problem. "Will it happen again? Can I get home?"

"Oh yeah. Once it starts, it's not a problem. You won't stall or anything. And if the car won't start next time, just bounce it a few times and it should start right up."

Hannah shook her head. "I can't believe you fixed it so fast."

Kelly blew on her knuckles and rubbed them on her shirt. "That's why I make the big bucks."

Hannah just had to laugh at the look on the mechanic's face.

Kelly leaned over to look in the window. "Who's your friend?"

Hannah let Cricket crawl up on her lap to stick his nose outside. "This is Cricket."

"Is he okay to pet?"

Hannah liked that Kelly asked first. Most people didn't. "Sure."

Letting him sniff her fingers first, Kelly scratched around his ears. "Hello, Cricket. You're pretty

cute, aren't you?"

His little tail was vibrating like mad. Hannah rubbed his belly to make sure she was ready to grab him if he decided to make a break for it. "So, what do I owe you for coming out to rescue me?"

"Nothing," Kelly said firmly. "I was putting off coming to the store anyway, so you kind of did me a favor. I'll look around and see if I can find a rebuilt solenoid to replace yours. It only takes a few minutes to change one out. If this is the first time this has happened, yours isn't in bad shape, but it's annoying when it does happen."

"Well, I really appreciate you running out to help me like this."

"It's really not a problem, Hannah. You take care and I'll be in touch about a replacement. See you later, Cricket."

Hannah watched her walk away. Kelly was not at all the way she had assumed from her masculine appearance. She was...*nice*. Putting Cricket back in the passenger seat, she put on her seat belt and headed home.

~***~

Jill showed up unexpectedly at her shop the next day. Hannah felt a moments irritation about it. She would not dream of bothering Jill at work and was pretty sure that Jill would not put up with it if she did. Was it that Jill did not consider their jobs to be equally important? Whatever it was, she was here now and Hannah resolved to be polite about it.

"You look very nice."

"Thank you." Jill brushed at the seat of the chair next to the coffee tray and sat down. "You look busy."

Hannah had two dogs in the dryer that she still had to comb out and she was almost done trimming a sweet little peek-a-poo bitch. She could not have her lunch until she got done with them. At best, she was looking at about fifteen minutes clear to eat. "It's been one of those days. How have you been?"

"Not bad. I had a problem with one of my people yesterday."

Hannah focused on her work, inserting appropriate noises in likely spots. Jill carried on as if she had Hannah's undivided attention. Finished with the trim, Hannah quickly combed out the last two dogs and cut their nails while Jill entertained herself with her story. She did pause twice as owners came to pick up their dogs, but then carried right on.

With *twelve* minutes to spare, Hannah took a container of yogurt from the shop fridge and began eating it. She had a mouthful when the front door opened and Kelly stepped in.

"Hi."

Silence descended and Hannah struggled not to choke. Swallowing, she smiled nervously. "Hi, Kelly. I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Kelly held up a small metal part with short wires hanging from it. "I got the part. I know you're too busy to talk, but I just wanted you to know it wasn't some hooligan out there messing with your car. I'll just switch the parts out and head back to work."

Hannah caught a glimpse of Jill's face and did not like the disapproving stare she saw there. "Um, Kelly, this is Jill Wilson. Jill, this is Kelly Lowell. She's a friend of mine," she added in defiance of Jill's attitude.

"My pleasure," Kelly said with a respectful nod of her head.

"Likewise," Jill said coolly.

This was too weird. Hannah glanced between the two women and made her choice. She stepped towards Kelly. "How much do I owe you for the part?"

"Nothing. See, one this was going in the trash, so I rebuilt it. I'll take yours and rebuild it, too. Then if someone needs it, I'll trade it for theirs."

It made an elegant sort of sense. "But, what about your time?"

Kelly shook her head and gave her a smile. "I don't charge my friends for little stuff like this. If it makes you more comfortable, call it a professional courtesy."

Hannah smiled back. "You're the best, Kelly. Thanks."

Kelly gave her a playful half-bow. "You're very welcome. Nice to meet you, Jill." She turned to leave, then stopped at the door. "By the way, there's a birthday party on Friday night at Mama's Pizzeria. It's for Janet Ellstrom. You know her, right?"

Hannah pictured the perky young woman. They were friendly at best. "Yeah."

"It's her big three-oh and it's an open party. Don't bring a present. You both are welcome to come. It should be fun."

Hannah looked to Jill and saw that she was interested. It looked like they had another date. "Sure. What time does it start?"

"Right about seven. The cake will be at eight or so. I'll see you both there?"

Hannah nodded. She watched through the glass door as Kelly went over to her car, popped the hood and began to work.

"How long have you been friends?"

Jill had come to stand beside her, but Hannah's gaze was fixed on Kelly's forearms. "Not very long."

"You never mentioned her."

Hannah shrugged. The tall woman's forearms rippled with muscle. Even the smallest movement in her hands produced a piston-like movement under her skin. "You and I haven't known each other all that long either."

"True."

"And I did mention her once. But you prefer male mechanics." Thinking of Janet's crowd, Hannah added, "There will be some very nice women at the party on Friday. You'll like them."

"Great. Should I pick you up at 6:45?"

Hannah considered insisting that *she* drive, but when it came right down to it, she just didn't care that much. "Sounds good."

Kelly was done. Pulling a blue rag from her back pocket, she wiped her hands, wiped off the car where she'd touched it and threw a mock salute in Hannah's direction. Hannah waved back and watched her leave. She would have to think of something nice to do for Kelly. The woman was beyond generous and a simple Thank You wasn't enough. Hannah decided to give it some thought.

"Well, I should be going," Jill said with a soft smile. "It was really nice to see you again."

"You, too."

"I'll see you on Friday."

"I'll be waiting." Hannah could see that Jill was waiting for something. She suspected it was a kiss, but she wasn't inclined to give her one. Hannah took another bite of yogurt and waved goodbye with her spoon.

Hannah had a total of two minutes to herself and then it was back to work.

Chapter Four

"You can't go, Cricket." Hannah smiled at his alert expression, but felt bad that he had to stay home. "I know you don't understand, but it's not personal. It's just too long for you to wait in the car." Zipping up her black slacks she added, "Especially Jill's car." Cricket's ears perked up at the word 'car' and she felt like a jerk.

Turning, Hannah opened her closet. "What do you think?" She tossed over her shoulder. "Sweater, blouse or T-shirt?" Cricket's head cocked to one side. "Blouse? Good choice." Hannah flipped through her clothes discounting this one due to color, that one because it was too heavy, another because she didn't want to risk dripping pizza sauce on it, and settled on a sleeveless blue that she knew set off her eyes. Kelly flashed through her mind and she grimaced.

"I'm in enough trouble with women as it is," she growled at herself. "The last thing I need is a hard case butch in the mix." Cricket barked and she had to laugh. "Thank you, sir, for your kind support."

Summer sandals and some casual jewelry completed her outfit just as her doorbell rang. Cricket raced to the living room and scratched at the door. Pushing Cricket gently to the side with her foot, Hannah opened the door to Jill's smile. "You look great!" Jill had on a tooled brown leather vest that caught her eye.

"So do you," Jill grinned. "I'm a little early. I hope that's okay."

"Sure. Make yourself at home. I only need a minute and I'll be ready." Hannah touched up her hair and face then stopped to study her reflection in the mirror. "It'll have to do," she said skeptically. Kelly's lanky form dashed through her mind's eye again and she shook her head to clear it. "Focus, girl. Focus."

Jill was sitting on the edge of the couch trying to entice Cricket onto her lap when she returned to the living room. "I don't think he likes me," Jill said with a sigh.

"He's just upset that he can't come with us." Hannah wondered though. Cricket was usually hungry for affection. She wondered if it was his own opinion he was expressing or if he was just picking up on her own uncertainty. "I'm ready."

Jill stood with her keys in hand, while Hannah picked up the remote and turned the TV on to Animal Planet. She had forgotten the last time they went out and still felt bad about it.

"You be a good boy," she said to Cricket.

"You're leaving the TV on for the dog?" Jill asked with surprise.

"Of course." Hannah glanced at Jill in time to see the tail end of a supercilious look. "Dogs are pack animals. They *need* the pack. If he can't come with us, the least thing I can do is make him

feel not so alone."

Jill held up her hands. "That makes sense. I was just surprised."

"Haven't you ever had a dog?" Hannah reached for her purse and coat.

"We always had a dog when I was growing up." Jill opened the front door and stepped outside. "But they were rarely ever let in the house."

"What's the point of having a dog if it's not part of the family?" Hannah locked the door behind them. "I feel sorry for dogs that never get to go inside, especially if they're the only dog. It must be a horribly lonely existence."

"Some dogs belong outside."

Hannah opened the passenger door and looked over the roof at Jill. "I guess we'll have to agree to disagree."

"You're definitely a dog person," Jill laughed as she got into the car. "How do you feel about cats?"

Hannah closed her door and pulled on her seat belt. "I'm not fond of cats. I don't know if it's that I'm mildly allergic to them or that they're so antisocial."

"Antisocial?"

"Well, that's how they are around me."

"I like cats." Jill started up the motor and put the car in gear. "I like that they take care of themselves and aren't constantly begging for your attention. Cats appreciate space."

Hannah took a calming breath. "Do you have any cats?"

"Four. How allergic to them are you?"

"As long as I don't pet them or hug them it's not too bad, but it's like having hay fever all the time."

"Oh."

Hannah relaxed into her seat and let Jill take care of the driving.

~***~

Mama's Pizzeria was warm and smelled divine. There looked to be about forty lesbians scattered about and Hannah smiled to see that she knew so many of them, even if only in passing. *This*

might be fun, she thought. Janet, the birthday girl, was standing by the jukebox and Hannah made her way over with Jill in tow.

"Happy Birthday!" She said with a hug.

"Thanks!" Janet returned the hug and looked Jill over. "Introduce me to your date."

"This is Jill Wilson," she stepped to the side to allow Jill room. "Jill, this is Janet Ellstrom."

"Happy Birthday," Jill said as she extended her hand.

"You must be new. I've never seen you before."

Jill shrugged. "I've only been in Edgewater for three months. Kelly invited us to your party."

Hannah slowly backed away as Janet began grilling Jill for personal information and made her way to the table where the cake was displayed. The giant 30 painted on the cake in icing made her smile. A wicker basket sat next to it with a sign requesting donations to pay for dinner and Hannah dropped twenty-five dollars into it.

Her next stop was the counter where she bought herself a beer. She considered buying one for Jill, but felt that she had already paid for her dinner and enough was enough. Women were playing pool and pinball and the Trapshoot screen was going, though she couldn't identify straight away who was playing.

Hannah wandered over to the pool table with her beer and was greeted by Alyson and Toni. With half her mind on the conversation she looked around, but she couldn't see Kelly. Jill was in the middle of a small group and gave a small wave when she saw Hannah looking.

Feeling obligated, Hannah made her way back to Jill just in time for the pizzas and they found a table to sit at.

"I'm having a great time," Jill grinned. "Everyone seems so nice."

Hannah looked around the room before answering. "They are all nice. This is a good group."

"I don't see Kelly though. Why would she invite us if she wasn't going to come?" Jill held up a hand. "Not that I mind."

Hannah blinked in surprise. "You don't like her?"

"It's not that I don't like her," Jill said thoughtfully. "But she's awfully butch and I've heard some things."

Hannah felt a tickle of anger at Jill's words and chagrin that she had once felt the same way about someone she barely knew and who had been nothing but helpful and polite to her. "What have

you heard?"

"Something about a restraining order. And someone else said they heard she was stone."

"Stone?"

"Stone butch." Jill waved her pizza as if conjuring something out of the air.

"I don't know what that means."

Jill's voice lowered. "She does everything in bed. She doesn't allow her lovers to make love to her."

Hannah tried to put that image together with the image of Kelly. "I can't believe someone would say that about her."

"I'm just saying what I've heard," Jill said defensively. "Maybe it's true and maybe it's not. I'm new here."

"What do people say about me?" Hannah could feel her shoulders tensing up and tried to keep it out of her voice.

Jill looked nervous. "Jay and Freddie think you're adorable and sweet." A tentative smile came forth. "I have to agree with them."

"I know what Jay and Freddie think. What else have you heard?"

Jill put down her pizza and used a napkin to wipe her mouth. "Are we having a fight? Because I don't think this is a good place for it."

Hannah set her chin and waited.

Jill finally sighed and leaned forward. "I heard someone say that you were hard to get to know. Kind of stuffy. And people wonder why you threw Brenda out. One day you looked like a lifetime couple and the next she was gone. If she hadn't given notice at her job they'd be wondering if she was buried in your backyard."

Hannah closed her eyes and took three careful breaths. Opening her eyes she admitted, "Maybe I am hard to get to know. I'm very selective about my friends. But I didn't throw Brenda out. She left."

Jill opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted.

"Can I have everybody's attention?" Janet's best friend, Andrea, was standing on a chair with her arms in the air and Hannah turned gratefully from Jill to watch her. "First of all, thanks to all of you for coming. And a special thanks to Mama's Pizzeria for letting us take over the place."

Hannah joined in the loud cheers and applause, laughing when the staff took a bow in unison.

"I'd also like to thank Ricci, Mary and Barb for decorating this afternoon." More cheers and some catcalls. "A huge thanks from me personally for your generosity in helping to pay for dinner. I was going to have to make up the difference if you all didn't come through." Hannah laughed at the look of relief on Andrea's face. "If there are no objections, the money left over will be donated in Janet's name to the local food bank."

All around the room women were nodding approval as they clapped.

"I didn't pay," Jill hissed.

"I took care of it," Hannah whispered back.

"For those of you who are drinking tonight, we have some volunteers to drive you home. Will our designated drivers please stand up?"

Three women stood to a huge round of applause.

"I thought we had 4 drivers," Andrea said.

A woman Hannah didn't know spoke up. "Kelly's one of us."

"Oh, right." Andrea had a big smile. "I guess that brings us to our surprise entertainment." Anticipation filled the room and Hannah wondered what was going to happen. Andrea pointed to the jukebox and the woman who stood guard on it turned to push buttons. "We have a special treat tonight in honor of Janet's birthday. It is my great pleasure to introduce to you... The Superlatives!"

Six drag queens swished into the room. Each one wore a sequined floor length gown, all in a different color of the rainbow. White opera gloves and a bouffant wig straight out of the Fifties finished their costumes. They were so outrageously camp and so thoroughly enjoying themselves that Hannah burst out laughing with the rest of the room. Already in step, they smoothly went into a choreographed dance when 'It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To' came out of the speakers.

Hannah slid out of the booth and began clapping along with everyone else. She recognized Andrew and Lee in orange and blue and she thought the green might be Alan. Of them all, yellow was easily the most beautiful. Hannah glanced over at Janet and saw that she was laughing so hard that tears had come to her eyes.

When the song ended the applause was deafening. Hannah hooted her appreciation along with everyone else. Andrea had a camera and began taking pictures of the group of men with Janet and anyone else who wanted a turn. Still laughing, Hannah sat down and finished off her beer.

"Do you know them?" Jill asked.

"Some of them." Hannah named the ones she knew. "I don't recognize the other ones. The yellow one sure is pretty, don't you think?"

"You don't recognize her, do you?"

"Her?" Hannah started to disagree, but the look on Jill's face made her turn to take a second look. At first she couldn't see it, but then she saw her in profile and knew. "Oh my God! It's Kelly!"

She let her eyes travel over the long sequined dress, noting how well it showed off Kelly's figure. Looking back up to Kelly's face she breathed, "Wow!" Kelly was looking right at her and Hannah saw her blush before she turned away. "I don't believe it."

"Couldn't you tell?" Jill did not look amused.

"I just assumed they were all men. I didn't look any closer than that." Hannah laughed at herself. "That'll teach me to make assumptions about people."

"Do you want another beer?"

"Sure." Hannah reached into her purse for money and Jill stopped her.

"You paid for the pizza. I'll get the beer."

Hannah smiled at her in thanks. She felt better about Jill now that she had demonstrated a willingness to reciprocate. Hannah promised herself to try harder to give Jill the benefit of the doubt.

Jill came back and they finished eating. Hannah excused herself to go to the bathroom after finishing her second beer. As she opened the door she heard a heartfelt "Nuts!" from one of the stalls.

"Hello?" She asked.

"Who is it?" Asked a familiar voice.

Hannah smiled. "Kelly? It's Hannah."

"Double nuts." Kelly muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't get out of this dress."

"Do you want some help?" Hannah waited in silence for a response. "Is there someone I can get

for you?"

"I'm embarrassed," Kelly said quietly.

"Why? You look fabulous."

"I look like a drag queen."

Hannah choked back a laugh. "I thought that was the idea. Let me in and I'll give you a hand."

The stall opened and Hannah slipped inside. Kelly relocked the door and turned around. "This is Robert's dress. He's a lot bigger than I am through the chest and shoulders and Eric had to pin it smaller to fit."

Hannah reached up and investigated the zipper and safety pin arrangement. "Which one is Eric?"

"Purple."

"Who's red?"

"Zach. Thanks for helping with this. Robert would have killed me if I tore his dress."

"Can you crouch down a little? I can't see what I'm doing." All of the pins were on the inside and it took Hannah only a moment to get the first one undone once she could see. "I didn't recognize you at first. Do you do this sort of thing often?" Kelly's well developed back was warm against the back of Hannah's fingers.

"Not likely. If Robert wasn't off visiting his family in Florida I wouldn't have done it this time."

"I'm glad I got to see it then." Hannah's awareness of Kelly became more acute the further down her back she got. "How long did it take to get this on?"

"About an hour. Of course," Kelly sniggered, "almost half of that was Lee saying 'Lord, what I could do if I had those tits.'"

Hannah forgot herself and laughed out loud. Kelly turned with one arm holding the dress protectively against her chest and a smile as wide as Texas. "Thanks, Hannah. You're a lifesaver."

Hannah suddenly became aware that she was in a bathroom stall with a woman she didn't want to like as much as she was starting to. "You've helped me, too." She held out the safety pins and Kelly took them from her hand. "I should get back out there."

"Did you come in here for a reason?"

Hannah grinned and reached for the lock. "Two beers, and thanks for reminding me." She let

herself out and into the neighboring stall.

"Where's Cricket?" Kelly asked through the separating wall.

"Home. I don't think Jill likes to have him in her car."

"But he's so adorable. How could anyone not..." Kelly paused. "Sorry. It's none of my business."

"Do you think it's silly to leave the TV on for a dog?" Hannah held her breath and wondered why.

"No. Animal Planet?"

Hannah smiled in relief. "Of course."

"It would be cruel to leave him with nothing to listen to. Dogs are people, too."

"Do you have a dog?"

"No." Kelly's voice was quiet and the rustle of clothing stopped momentarily. "I had a dog, but she died last year. I'm not at a place where I can talk about it yet."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

Hannah stopped at the sink to wash her hands and watched Kelly come out of the stall in her usual jeans and a T-shirt that said 'Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History'. The wig was gone and her blonde hair looked like trampled grass. She had to chuckle at the garish makeup.

The bathroom door burst open. "Kelly!" Andrea laughingly punched Kelly's arm. "You were great! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I never would have believed it! You better hurry up. We're going to light the cake." Andrea suddenly realized there was another person in the room and pasted on a not very convincing smile. "Hi, Hannah. Are you having a good time?"

Hannah felt like she had been found rifling through someone's purse. "Very." With what dignity she could muster she tossed her paper towel in the garbage and went back to her table.

"Are you alright?" Jill asked. "I was about to come looking for you."

"There was a line." This was such a common thing when women gathered that Hannah knew it would be believed. For some reason she didn't want Jill, or anyone else, to know about her conversation with Kelly. It seemed too personal for that. "Did I miss anything?"

"No, but it looks like they're getting ready to light the candles on Janet's cake."

~***~

"That was a fun party," Jill said in the car.

Hannah didn't feel like talking. She was feeling a slight buzz and it was making her tired. "I'm glad you liked it. Did you make any new friends?"

"A few, I think. It's hard to say after only one meeting. I thought Andrea was particularly nice."

Hannah made noises in the appropriate places while Jill talked of her evening, but couldn't get interested in what she was hearing. She was anxious to get home to Cricket and she wanted time to think. The entire evening had messed with her neatly ordered expectations and she needed to reorganize.

Jill walked her to her door and when Jill's hands came to her face she sighed. Too late she realized her sigh could be taken for surrender and Jill was kissing her deeply. Remembering her promise to give Jill the benefit of the doubt Hannah not only allowed it, but tried to return it. She could feel her body responding, but more as a reflex than an outpouring of emotion. Her lack of emotion made her afraid and she pulled back.

"What's wrong?" Jill asked breathlessly.

"I can't," Hannah managed.

"Why not?" Concern etched Jill's features.

Hannah wasn't prepared to tell the truth. "I'm drunk and I don't feel so good."

Jill pulled her close for a hug and Hannah felt like crying. She held her briefly, then disengaged and unlocked her door. "Thanks for everything, Jill."

"I'll see you later?"

"Yes." With the door closed behind her, Hannah scooped Cricket off the floor and let him kiss her face. "Did you miss mama? 'Cause mama sure missed you."

Cricket squirmed in excitement and Hannah's guilt over having made him stay home alone yet again piled itself onto her already mixed up feelings. Keeping him tucked under her arm she went to the refrigerator and found the baby carrots. Hannah used her teeth to break them into small pieces and fed them to Cricket with baby talk and kisses.

With Cricket and her guilt mollified, Hannah changed out of her party outfit and into her favorite flannel pajamas. After brushing her teeth and settling under the covers, she began to ruminate.

Why don't I have feelings for Jill? If I had to write down everything I wanted in a woman Jill would fit 90 percent of it. She's exactly what I'm looking for and I don't feel anything for her. In

fact, I think she annoys me. Why is that? It can't be that she has cats. I always thought chemistry played less a part in romance than people think but maybe I was wrong. Maybe our pheromones are incompatible. But if that's true, then why does she seem to be attracted to me? I like Jill just fine, but I don't think we can ever be more than friends. When she kissed me...that was so strange. I don't think I've ever felt so empty. But why would my body respond like that? It was so creepy! I don't think I can stand it if she kisses me again.

Hannah rolled over and let Cricket settle in against her back. So people think Brenda's buried in the back yard, eh? Funny that I didn't know she had given notice at work. It's also funny that her friends haven't put the word out why she left. Maybe they don't know! Am I the only one who knows why she left? Is it possible that Brenda kept her intentions secret from everyone? Not just me? Maybe she's embarrassed. I would be if I left a long-term relationship to be with someone I met online. No matter how many times I go over it, I just can't see any indications that she was unhappy. True, we were far past the wild, passionate stage of our relationship, but I thought we were building something that would last a lifetime. Our lovemaking was still exciting-at least for me it was. I still miss her sometimes. I miss snuggling up to her at night; she was always so warm. And I miss cooking for her and knowing she was on her way home. I don't miss how she left her clothes all over the house, but everybody's got faults. You just have to live with them.

Hannah reached out for another pillow, pulled it under the blankets and hugged it. A soft smile came to her lips as The Superlatives danced through her mind. Their long white gloves stood out in her memory, twisting and waving in time to the music. She pictured Kelly in step with the men and giggled. I wish I could have seen them teaching her the moves. I'll bet that was funny. I still can't believe that she would take part in it. I never would have bet on seeing her in a dress; especially that dress. But she was great! Kelly Lowell: auto mechanic, designated driver and drag queen. And she's a dog lover. I can still feel her skin on my hand if I think about it. Her skin was so soft, but there was steel underneath. I wonder if she works out or if it's just a consequence of the work she does. She's been awfully nice to me: all of the extra work she did on my car and coming here to replace that part. I wonder if she's like that with everyone? She must be. She volunteered to be a designated driver and she was helping to clean up at the pizza parlor when Jill and I left. It probably doesn't mean anything. She did ask me out that once, but that doesn't have to mean anything either. What was it Jill said she heard? That Kelly was Stone? I wonder if that's true? It seems like such a strange rumor, but it's got a name so it must be more common than I know. What would that be like: having a lover who attended to your needs and never let you give in return? Half of what's so wonderful about making love is pleasuring your partner. I can't imagine someone wanting to be that way. There must be a good reason if it's true.

I'm less inclined to think that the restraining order means anything. With a little creativity I could probably get a restraining order against myself. Maybe she's the one who has an order against someone else.

I wonder what kind of dog she had.

It was hours before an exhausted Hannah was able to stop musing and fall asleep.

Chapter Five

Freddie breezed in the door just as Hannah let Keisha, a 7 year old Husky, out of the drying cage.

"*Ola, Pelirroja!*" He sang out.

"You're just in time," she said with relief. "Help me get this girl up on the table." Freddie scooped Keisha up in his arms and set her down as Hannah slipped the short leash above the table around her neck. "Thanks."

"You look terrible," Freddie observed.

"Thanks. I really needed to hear that."

"Are you coming down with something?"

Hannah grabbed the appropriate brush and began combing. "I couldn't sleep last night."

Freddie smiled slyly. "Any particular reason why?"

"Fretting mostly. Nothing as fun as what you're suggesting."

"What were you fretting about?"

"Women."

Freddie dropped into the chair at her desk with a sigh. "Tell Freddie all about it."

Hannah lifted Keisha's muzzle and worked through the thick fur on her chest. "Do me a favor and make me some coffee? I'm not going to make it if I don't get some caffeine and you still make the best coffee in the world."

Freddie reached for the coffeepot and stepped into the house to get water. It was the exact same water that she had in the shop, but he insisted on 'clean' water. "So," he called from down the hall, "were you fretting about *all* women or one particular woman?"

"Just the ones I know," Hannah called back. She waited for him to come back with the water before continuing. "Did you know that people are this close to thinking that Brenda is buried in the back yard?"

Freddie gave her a melodramatic look and started measuring coffee. "Maybe we should put up a marker just to make things interesting. We could have a memorial service and wear black. Say the word and I'll arrange everything."

Hannah stopped brushing in the middle of the Husky's back and smiled at her dear friend. "Maybe The Superlatives could sing a dirge."

"Oh my God!" Freddie gasped. "I heard they were at Janet's party last night. How were they?"

"Amazing," Hannah emphasized. "You have *got* to see them. They were totally decked out in the whole Fifties thing and the choreography was perfect."

"I thought Robert was out of town."

"He was...is. They filled his spot with Kelly."

"Kelly who?"

"Lowell. She works at the auto place down on North Street."

"She?" Freddie looked horrified. "A woman wore Robert's dress?" After starting the coffee maker he plopped back down in the chair. "He's going to have a stroke."

"I totally thought she was a guy until after they sang. He would have been proud, I think. Besides, another one of the group--Eric, I think she said--was the one who pinned her into it, so if anyone gets in trouble it should be him."

"Oh," Freddie waved a hand negligently, "if Eric let her than it was probably okay."

"How come you're not in the group? It sounds like something you'd love."

Freddie studied his nails. "Creative differences."

Hannah glanced over to see Freddie studiously ignoring her. "And that means?"

"They wanted me to wear orange. Me!" Freddie wrinkled his nose. "I look hideous in orange."

Hannah struggled not to laugh. "Then you did the right thing."

"You know that they're going to do an hour at the benefit next month?"

"Which one?" Hannah tossed the brush on the table and picked up the nail clippers.

"The Vet's Hall on the 18th." Freddie grinned. "Are you and Jill going to go?"

Hannah concentrated on holding Keisha's foot steady as she trimmed her claws and hoped the

question would go away. Unfortunately, Freddie was not one to be denied.

"Is it not working out with you two?" He pressed.

"I don't think so," she admitted.

Freddie stood and began scratching behind Keisha's ears. "Well, she was a long shot, but we had hopes."

"I did, too. She seems to be everything I'm looking for, but there's just no spark." Hannah shrugged. "At least not on my end."

"How did she take it?"

"We haven't talked about it yet. That was part of what kept me up all night."

"You don't need me to tell you to do it soon. The last thing you need is a sexually frustrated dyke claiming that you strung her along." Freddie looked at his watch. "I've got a wash and set on Mrs. Pain-in-my-Backside Baumeister in ten, so I've got to run. Will you come to dinner tonight?"

"I'm sleeping tonight. How about tomorrow?"

"I'll tell Jay." Freddie made kissing noises at Keisha and blew one at Hannah before leaving in a rush.

"He sure livens the place up, doesn't he?" Hannah asked the dog. Keisha gave a mighty shake and Hannah let her down off the table. She let her strut for a moment before putting her in a cage to wait for her owner, then poured herself a cup of Freddie's coffee and pulled her next dog out of the other dryer.

~***~

Hannah kicked off her shoes and lay back on the lounge chair. "Are you sure you don't want any help?" Jay was tending the grill and Freddie lounged beside her.

"You two work on your feet all day," Jay pointed out. "I spend most of the day on my ass."

Freddie whispered behind his hand, "He just likes to be looked at. Compliment something once in a while and he'll do anything you want."

Jay adjusted his glasses contemptuously and lowered the lid on the grill. "What would you like to drink, Hannah? We've got fresh strawberries if you'd like a daiquiri."

Feeling completely spoiled Hannah nodded and watched him walk inside. Cricket followed him like toilet paper stuck on your shoe. The evening sun had just gone behind some trees, but it was

still very comfortably warm. Hannah let the back of her chair back another notch and settled back with a sigh. "How's that new woman working out?"

"Linda?" Freddie asked. "She has solid skills and she's good with people, but I think it'll be awhile before she comes to appreciate the perks of working for a fairy. She's trying really hard to be enthusiastic in her tolerance. Once she relaxes I think she'll be a keeper."

"I assume you're swishing for all you're worth?"

"But, of course!" Freddie laughed. "You know, if you ever decide you've had enough with grooming dogs I'll build you a station and you can come to work with me. We would have so much fun! Just think of it!"

"Thanks for the offer, Freddie, but I've been away from cutting hair for too long. If I went back to people now they'd have to order their styles by breed."

Freddie laughed heartily then jerked to a stop and sat up. "Wait a minute. What if we put in an area for you to do dogs? We could do owner and pet at the same time."

Hannah could see Freddie getting overexcited about his new idea. "The only drawback I can see is that owners get distressed over how their dogs feel about being groomed. They don't like to see Spot fighting to get away and me having to hold them down. Plus, the dogs are less manageable when the owners are watching."

Freddie sagged back into his chair dejectedly.

"It's not a bad idea though." Hannah did think it was an interesting idea, but she wasn't prepared to give up working out of her garage just yet. "I think we should keep it in mind and see what develops."

"It would be fun though, wouldn't it?"

"Working with you would be a blast and you know it." Freddie's smile told her that he felt better.

"Three daiquiris on the way," she heard Jay call out.

He held out a tray and Hannah took a drink from it. "Thanks, Jay." Cricket jumped into her lap to see if she had food then jumped down and ran off to chase dragonflies.

"What's this Freddie told me about a Memorial Service for Brenda?"

Hannah smiled before taking a drink. "I heard some rumors. It seems that Brenda kept secrets from everyone. I think we're the only ones who know that she ran off to meet her Internet lover. Apparently people have been wondering if I have her buried in the back yard."

Jay grinned wickedly. "As your lawyer I'm bound by attorney/client privilege. You can tell me

the truth."

"What about Freddie?" Hannah laughed.

"Spousal privilege."

"What would I do without you guys?"

Jay reached out and ruffled her hair before getting up to see if the grill was ready for cooking. "You said rumors, as in plural. What else did you hear?"

"That I'm hard to get to know. Do you think that's true? Am I stuffy?"

"No!" Both men echoed each other. Freddie reached over and took her hand. "It only takes one person to start a rumor. Obviously this is a person not worthy of your notice and anything that she says should be treated as drivel. Just ignore it."

"I have to agree," Jay said. "Certainly I think you are choosy about who you allow to be friends with you, but that's simply good common sense. After all, you chose us and that shows remarkable good taste."

"Oh!" Freddie said suddenly. "Speaking of good taste, Hannah got to see Robert's group at Janet's birthday party."

Jay looked over his shoulder with a frown. "I thought Robert was in Florida."

"He is," Freddie giggled. "Eric put a woman in his dress. What was her name, Hannah?"

"Kelly Lowell."

Jay's face registered surprise, then his lawyer mask slipped into place. Hannah sat up to see him better.

"Do you know her?"

"I've met her, yes." Jay's tone was careful.

"I know that look," Freddie said. "I'll bet she is, or was, a client."

Hannah sat back and tried to look blasé. "She seems nice. Last Wednesday night I was at the store and my car wouldn't start. I gave her a call and she came right out and helped me get it going again. Then she came to my house on Thursday during her lunch and replaced the solenoid without asking for anything."

"Why would she do that?" Freddie looked confused.

"She works at Edgewater Auto. Remember I took my car there for a check up not long ago? She's the one who worked on it. I guess she felt like she missed something and she was making up for it. She called it a professional courtesy." Hannah kept Jay in the corner of her eye. She knew he would never betray a confidence and she hoped to catch a clue to Kelly's character from his expression. "She actually did a very good job taking Robert's place. I never would have pictured her doing something like that."

Jay tried to hide a smile but his eyes were sparkling with mirth. "Is she going to perform with them at the benefit next month?"

"I don't think so. I only spoke with her briefly, but I got the strong impression it was a one time thing." Jay and Freddie both stared at her with measuring looks. "What?"

"Just thinking," Jay said as he turned to the grill and began laying out the ribs.

Hannah looked over at Freddie who was very carefully picking imaginary lint from his shorts. "What? Have I got something on my teeth?"

"On your sleeve, *Pelirroja*," Freddie said cryptically.

It took her a moment to understand that they were assuming that she had an interest in Kelly. She opened her mouth to object and couldn't. She wasn't sure just yet exactly what her interest in Kelly might be, but if she was honest with herself she knew that there was something going on. Covering her embarrassment for a moment she finished her drink. "Maybe," she finally admitted. "I need to find out more about her before I decide. It would help if you would give me your opinion, Jay."

"I don't know her on a personal basis," he hedged.

"Then what's your professional opinion of her character?"

Jay stared at her for a second and Hannah could see that he was thinking it over. "I respect her. I think she is probably a fine person."

"High praise," Freddie nodded. "What does she look like?"

"Butch," Hannah confessed.

"Butcher than me?" Freddie asked.

"Than I," Jay corrected patiently.

Freddie gasped. "She's butcher than Jay?"

"By an order of magnitude," Hannah giggled at the dismay on his face.

Freddie drew back thoughtfully. "Oh my," he said slowly, "I'll bet she looked good in Robert's dress."

Their laughter set Cricket to barking.

~***~

Hannah set the brake on her grandmother's wheelchair in the shade some distance from the park pavilion so the sound system wouldn't be so overwhelming. The Friday night Concerts in the Park were one of their favorite summer activities and tonight had a Caribbean Folk music group. The music wasn't set to begin for another 20 minutes, but Nana enjoyed seeing people even more than she looked forward to the music.

"Is this okay?"

"Perfect, dear. My, what a beautiful day this has turned out to be."

"Do you want me to take Cricket?" Hannah had other things to get from the car and sometimes her grandmother was too weary to handle the little dog.

"No, he's a little gentleman today. We'll be here when you get back."

Hannah patted her shoulder and went back to the car. It would be cooler later and while she would find it enjoyable, Nana would be chilled. Filling her arms with blankets and bottles of water she made her way back through the gathering crowd and spread a blanket on the grass beside the wheelchair. It only took a moment to arrange everything and Hannah lay back using another blanket as a pillow. Cricket licked her face and Hannah rough housed with him for a spell.

"Hannah, dear," Nana said. "What was the name of that girl you're seeing?"

"Jill, but I don't think things are going to work out between us."

"That's too bad. She sounded so nice."

"She *is* nice, but I just don't feel anything but friendly with her. I'll have to keep on looking."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Nana was quiet for a time. "Have you heard anything about Brenda?"

Hannah sat up and leaned back against the wheelchair so they could talk more quietly. "Nothing. As far as I know she hasn't contacted anyone. I am still shocked at how quickly that happened. Everything was just fine the evening before. I go over and over it in my mind and I still can't see any warning signs." Nana's hand brushed through her hair and Hannah closed her eyes.

"Is her leaving like that stopping you from having feelings for Jill?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, don't stop looking, dear. There's someone special for you out there and I can't wait for you to meet her."

"I love you, too, Nana."

The microphone on the pavilion squealed and then the emcee was thanking everyone for coming out and mentioning the local businesses that were sponsoring the summer concert series. The band was introduced and soon the park was filled with the stylized sounds of the islands. Right away people got up to dance in front of the pavilion and Hannah watched them happily. Cricket was at the end of his leash begging to be let loose so he could play with the toddler on the next blanket and Hannah could feel the vibration of her grandmother's hand on the wheelchair arm keeping time with the music. Except for the fact that she didn't have a lover nearby she was perfectly happy.

Every once in a while someone she knew would happen by and she would wave if they didn't stop or visit with them briefly before they went on their way. At the intermission she got up and wrapped Nana in blankets. She was just settling one around Nana's shoulders when she heard a familiar voice.

"Mrs. Archer?"

Hannah looked up in surprise to find Kelly's attention fixed on her grandmother. She looked at Nana to see her reaction and found her squinting in Kelly's direction.

"Do I know you, dear?"

Kelly went to one knee and placed her hand on the arm of the wheelchair. "You used to, but it's been nearly 20 years. I look a lot different now, I'm sure."

Nana adjusted her glasses and peered closely at Kelly. "I'm sorry, but you don't look familiar. Tell me your name and maybe that will jog my memory."

"It's Kelly Lowell, Mrs. Archer."

"Oh, my!" Nana lifted a fragile hand to her mouth and then reached out to rub Kelly's short blond hair. "What have you done to your hair?"

Kelly reached up and brushed Nana's silver hair back over her ear with a grin. "What have you done with yours?"

Hannah couldn't help but smile at the cackle her grandmother let out, but she felt very confused. "You two know each other?"

"Hello, Hannah." Cricket yipped at Kelly's knee and she picked him up to let him kiss her. "Mrs.

Archer and I used to have long talks."

"You remember, Hannah. I used to watch you practice tennis everyday and Kelly here kept me company."

Hannah searched through her memory. She seemed to remember Nana always sitting with someone in the bleachers, but she just couldn't put a face to her.

"What happened to you, Kelly? What have you been doing? How's your family?"

Kelly sat down on the grass with crossed legs and deposited Cricket in her lap. "Well, I survived high school, just like you said I would, and then I was in the Army for 4 years."

"The Army?" Nana's hands tightened in her lap.

"Dad said it was either college or the military. I don't think he thought any of us girls would actually choose the military over college, but I always was contrary. You know that."

Nana cackled again and Hannah dropped to her knees where she could see Kelly clearly. She could not have been more dumbfounded.

"They taught me to shoot a gun, make a bed and do what I was told," Kelly continued, "and then they put me in the motor pool and I learned about engines. Mostly cars and trucks. I didn't get to work on the fun stuff like tanks and personnel carriers. When I got out I stayed down in New Mexico for a while, but then I got to missing home, so I came back here about 7 years ago and I've been working down at Edgewater Auto since then. What have you been doing?"

"Getting' old, honey! Getting' old." Nana's laughter was contagious. "What ever happened to your sister, the older one that was dating that football player? I used to worry about her something terrible."

"Sophia went off to college and discovered an accountant. She's a teacher up in Idaho now and they have 3 kids almost grown. She's very happy."

Hannah leaned back on her hands and watched Kelly with her grandmother and her dog. The music started again and the two of them continued to talk about Kelly's family and her experiences in the military. Cricket lay sprawled belly up in her lap, sound asleep, and Kelly scratched him gently without pause as she talked. The longer she listened and watched Kelly's face the more Hannah felt drawn to her. She was wearing stone washed denim jeans, high top athletic shoes and a green T-shirt printed with the words 'Nice Rack' over a picture of pool balls ready for break. Hannah couldn't help but notice that Kelly did, indeed, appear to have a 'nice rack'. She also had flawless skin and a beautiful mouth. *Why didn't I notice that before?*

"What about you?" Nana asked finally. "Have you started a family?"

"My interests lie in another direction," Kelly said carefully.

Nana only hesitated a moment. "Do you have a sweetheart then?"

"No, ma'am." Kelly smiled. "Not currently."

"Well, then," Nana said brightly. "Have you met my granddaughter?"

Hannah was horrified that her grandmother was trying to set her up. "Nana!"

"Yes, ma'am, I have."

Kelly's quiet sincerity caught her attention and Hannah gaped at her stupidly.

"She's available you know," Nana said with satisfaction.

"Grandma! You're embarrassing me!" Hannah wanted to disappear.

"My mother does this to me, too," Kelly chuckled. "How often do they let you out of your cage, Mrs. Archer?"

Nana thought this was too funny.

"We try to do something at least once a week," Hannah put in. She didn't want Kelly to think she wasn't taking care of her grandmother properly.

Kelly looked over her shoulder. "It looks like the concert is over. I hope I didn't ruin it for you with all my jabber." She lifted Cricket and hugged him briefly under her chin before setting him on the ground. "Can I help you get your things back to your car?"

Hannah started to object, but her grandmother latched onto Kelly like a lifeline, directing her in the gathering and folding of blankets. What took Hannah both arms to carry, Kelly tucked up under one and held Cricket's leash as well. Feeling awkward she released the brake on Nana's chair and led the way back to her car.

"If you aren't busy on Wednesday night," Kelly offered with her head down, "I'm playing pool out at Sam's Hide Out on Mesquite Drive. I made the semifinals in the annual women's tourney and I'd like it if you could come and watch. Not that you have to or anything," she added quickly. "But if you get bored and don't have other plans it would be nice to see you there."

"I'll think about it," Hannah said. "What time?"

"The first match starts at 7:30. I didn't think I'd make it this far in the tournament so it's pretty exciting for me."

Hannah could tell that her grandmother was hanging on every word and that she would get no peace unless she agreed to go. "I'll try to be there."

"You're welcome to come, too, Mrs. Archer."

"No, dear," Nana said. "That's past my bedtime. You girls will do fine without me."

Hannah opened the trunk of the car and Kelly placed the blankets inside. "Does she need help to get in the car?" Kelly whispered.

"No," Hannah said. "But thanks for carrying everything. You saved me a trip."

Kelly said her good-byes and sauntered away. Hannah watched her easy stride and the way her body centered itself over her slim hips, finding it surprisingly erotic. Nana cleared her throat and Hannah guiltily jumped to open the passenger door and hold her chair in place.

"That was a nice surprise," Nana said as she carefully levered herself to her feet. "She was such a nice girl."

Hannah always held her breath in fear when her grandmother was on her feet. Age, arthritis and a lifetime of waitressing had left her racked with pain and a fall at this stage in her life could be life threatening. How she withstood the constant agony with such a cheerful demeanor was a mystery to Hannah, but she hoped that if she ever found herself in a similar physical state she would be able to maintain her own sense of humor and dignity.

"I'm surprised that you knew Kelly," she admitted as she drove.

"Why?"

"Well, I don't remember her. I remember now that one year you always seemed to be sitting with someone, but I never actually met her."

Nana looked thoughtful. "Come to think of it, I'm not sure that she ever stayed long enough to meet you. She came every day though. One day we just struck up a conversation and became friends. She was such a sweet child. Did I tell you that she used to bring me flowers?"

Hannah shook her head. "What did you two talk about?"

"I can't remember that far back," Nana snorted.

Hannah kept Kelly in the back of her mind as she took her grandmother back to her home and got her settled for the night. When she arrived home sometime later and played her messages there was one from Jill and Hannah knew from the flutter of nerves she felt that it was time to end it.

She called Jill immediately and made arrangements for lunch the next day then went in search of her high school yearbooks.

~***~

Hannah's father was an infrequent visitor in her childhood and stopped coming around entirely when she was nine. She never knew if he had died, been incarcerated or had found a better supplier. Her mother was the black market pharmacist in the low-income apartment complex they lived in. On paper they lived on Welfare, but the fact was that her mother did a thriving business selling drugs. Hannah was rarely the recipient of any of those funds, but at least her mother always kept food in the house. Many of Hannah's neighbors didn't have even that.

She spent much of her childhood in her bedroom dreaming of a better life and staying out of her mother's way. Aside from getting whacked in the back of the head every time her mother noticed her, Hannah didn't feel as though she were abused. True, she was ignored and pushed aside, but over time she came to prefer it. She knew early on that as much as she might love her mother, she didn't like her at all. But she absolutely loathed the people who came to buy drugs. They frightened her. If they weren't desperate they were pretending to be friendly: sometimes too friendly. More than once Hannah had found herself backed into a corner by a customer eager to sample *her*. To her mother's credit, they were promptly thrown out and told to never return. Hannah was always punished for costing her mother a good client, but the few times this happened, all she could feel was loved. Her mother had saved her and she would never forget it.

Halfway through her freshman year, her mother was arrested in a raid. Unsure what was going to happen to her, Hannah requested a lawyer. Having been raised in an anti-law household, Hannah saw the police as the enemy and refused to speak. They insinuated that she could be placed in a juvenile detention facility until her 18th birthday as an accessory to her mother's crime, but Hannah experienced a moment of uncommon assertiveness and called them Nazi's. Her lawyer stepped in and put an end to the interrogation.

Under the suspicious eye of a police officer, Hannah was allowed to go home and pack her belongings. Not having suitcases she made do with a cardboard box and two plastic garbage bags. Carrying her things in this fashion with her neighbors watching was a humiliating experience and she swore that when she was allowed to control her own life, nothing like it would ever be necessary again.

After spending the night in a temporary foster home, Hannah called her lawyer and requested the chance to see her mother one more time. It was a wrenching encounter. As soon as she picked up the heavy black phone her mother began grilling her through the thick glass about what she had told the police. Hannah protested her innocence, reassuring her mother that she had kept quiet. When she had calmed somewhat, Hannah asked, "What's going to happen to me?"

"I've got more important things to worry about," her mother said. "I expect they'll put you in foster care."

To hear her life discounted by the one person who was supposed to care the most was devastating. "I don't want to be in foster care."

"And I don't want to be in jail," her mother spat angrily. "You can't always have what you want."

Tears threatened and Hannah fought them viciously; unwilling to allow her mother to see her cry. "Isn't there anyone who can take me?"

Her mother's eyes narrowed and then she suddenly laughed unpleasantly. "My mother always wanted you. If she's still alive maybe she'll take you in."

Hannah had grown up believing she had no living relatives, but she was scrabbling for a lifeline and until she was a little more secure, any handhold would do. "What's her phone number?"

"Hell, I don't know. She lives up north in Edgewater. Her name is Dorothy Archer." With that her mother slammed her phone down and left without a backward glance.

Hannah asked her lawyer to locate and call her grandmother. She would have done it herself, but she couldn't bear to be rejected twice in one day. To her relief and apprehension, her grandmother swore she'd be there before day's end. With her plastic bags and cardboard box shoved under a bench she waited at Child Protective Services for a grandmother she had neither seen nor known about.

With 45 minutes left before closing, Hannah saw a wiry older woman whose red hair was going gray run into the lobby and begin searching faces. Knowing in her gut that this woman was looking for her, Hannah slowly got to her feet just as the woman caught sight of her and broke into a tearful smile. She held her ground nervously as the woman approached, hoping a hug wasn't expected; but also hoping that she wouldn't have a choice.

"Oh, Hannah," her grandmother said as she briefly enclosed her in her arms. "I've been looking forward to this for 14 years. I would know you anywhere." She reached into her pocket for a photograph and said, "Look!"

Hannah took the old, worn picture and studied it. A younger version of the woman before her stood in a hospital holding a newborn with curly red hair. "Is that me?"

"Taken the day you were born," her grandmother said proudly. "That was the last time I saw you."

"What happened?"

Her grandmother laughed. "What say we take care of business and then I'll tell you anything you want to know over dinner."

They were required to appear before a judge the next day so Hannah and her grandmother stayed in a motel and spent most of the evening talking and getting to know one another. Hannah found herself hoping that the judge would let her go to live in Edgewater.

The next day was a whirlwind of activity. Her grandmother had a knack for making people speak plainly and do now what didn't need to be put off till tomorrow. Hannah was included in every

discussion and her grandmother made sure she knew what was going on. By late afternoon her mother had signed over her parental rights to her grandmother, the judge agreed to let Hannah go with her grandmother, school records were sent to Edgewater, her scant medical records were sent to a physician up north and she was given a chance to say goodbye to her best friend.

When everything had been taken care of and they got in the car to make the five hour drive, her grandmother turned to her and said, "I don't know what your life has been like, Hannah, but I promise that it will be better from now on. When we get home we'll negotiate house rules so we'll know what we can expect of each other. Think about what you want and we'll work it out. Deal?"

"Okay." She still had doubts; after all, this was the woman who had raised her own mother, but if it turned out half as good as it sounded she would be better off than she had been.

Time had proven to Hannah that her grandmother had been telling the truth. Rules were negotiated and they lived together very easily after a brief adjustment period. Her mother had remained in prison until Hannah was a young adult, but she had never tried to contact Hannah upon her release. Hannah was pleased with that.

~***~

Hannah sat on her bed amongst her high school memorabilia and remembered how quickly she had blended in with her classmates and her community. She had made numerous friends, attended parties and participated in sports.

That first summer she had asked about getting a job and her grandmother had convinced her own boss to hire Hannah as a dishwasher. The work had been hard, especially as small as she had been, but the paychecks were very rewarding. She used the money to buy her school clothes, school pictures and a tennis racket.

Looking at the pictures of her old friends, most of whom were still in the area but were now involved with their families, brought back fond memories. It wasn't until she reached her senior yearbook that she found Kelly's picture in the freshman roster.

With the aid of a magnifying glass she studied the brown-haired, pudgy face. It was impossible to reconcile the tall, strong, blond woman she knew now with this nondescript teenager. Maybe the mouth looked the same but she was otherwise unrecognizable. Hannah certainly couldn't remember her as anyone she had ever seen during tennis practice.

Under Kelly's name it said 'Junior Varsity Swim Team'. She flipped through the pages and found the team photos. Kelly stood with a grim face, her arms crossed over her breasts, in the front row. She was, by far, the smallest swimmer on the team and Hannah was surprised to see another photo of Kelly on the same page accepting a trophy. The caption stated that she had set a regional Junior Varsity record in the 400-meter freestyle, taking nearly 6 seconds off the old record.

"I'll be damned!" Hannah shook her head in amazement.

Chapter Six

Hannah arrived at the restaurant early and waited anxiously for Jill to arrive. She hated what she was about to do and selfishly hoped that it was what Jill wanted, too. They had only been dating a couple of weeks so she couldn't be all that attached as yet. Hannah ordered herbal tea in hopes that it would calm her stomach and Jill arrived at the same time.

"Hi!" Jill said as she slid into the booth. "You look great. How was the concert last night? I wish I could have gone with you. I still haven't met your grandmother and you speak so highly of her, but I had already promised to watch the kid across the hall while his mother..."

Hannah sat there with her mouth open as Jill rambled on. It was some time before she stopped for a breath. "The concert was nice, my grandmother is doing well and I'm glad you had so much fun with little Billy," she quickly squeezed into the breach.

"Sorry," Jill laughed. "I think I had a little too much coffee this morning."

The waitress came and they placed their orders, then caught up on what they had done during the week. Hannah felt worse with each passing minute. She picked at her lunch and tried to act as though nothing was wrong.

Jill finally stopped with a French fry between her fingers. "You seem kind of...antsy. Is something the matter?"

Hannah put down her fork and tried to relax. "I need to talk to you about something."

"What is it?"

Hannah hunted for a place to start. "If I were to write down the things I most want in a companion, you would meet more of them than anyone I've met in a long time."

Jill froze uncertainly. "Why doesn't that make you look happy?"

"I've been trying to understand how you can seem so perfect and yet I haven't developed any romantic feelings for you."

Jill picked up a napkin and wiped her mouth before speaking. "Are you dumping me?"

Hannah wrung her hands under the table. "I'm redefining the direction of our relationship."

"You're dumping me." Jill's voice was flat and her expression cold.

"I like you, Jill. You're smart and fun and I like hanging out with you. I hope we can be friends, but as much as I've wanted it, I just don't feel a spark."

A hint of desperation shone out of Jill's eyes. "Was it something I said or something I did?"

Hannah's heart went out to her. "No, Jill. It wasn't you."

"I can't believe this." Jill looked ready to cry. "Is it someone else and you just don't want to hurt my feelings?"

"You're a good woman and I *don't* want to hurt your feelings, but I think I knew right away that I wasn't going to fall in love with you."

"Why did you kiss me?"

"You're everything I thought I was looking for and I wanted to be in love. I hoped kissing you would kick start my emotions. I'm sorry."

Jill stared out the window at the parking lot for several minutes and Hannah waited quietly. The only feeling worse than having to dump someone who deserves to be loved was to be the one who was dumped. She hoped that she was not hurting Jill needlessly with her manner or her words. Hannah wondered if there was a self-help book somewhere that told you how to end a relationship so both parties felt good about it. If there were she hadn't seen it.

"You never answered my question," Jill eventually said. "Is there someone else?"

"No," Hannah said slowly. Mindful of future complications if she sidestepped the truth, she took a deep breath and chose her words carefully. "There's an awareness of someone else, but I don't know if it will develop into anything. I'm not even sure I want to find out for sure."

"Who is she?"

Hannah kept her face expressionless and her gaze open, but waited in silence for a long moment. "I really hope we can be friends, Jill. If you need time..."

"Don't patronize me," Jill said harshly.

"I'm just trying to be considerate," Hannah said. "I'm trying not to hurt you."

Jill leaned over the table intently, tears in the corners of her eyes. "Then why did you pick such a public place for this little scene?"

Hannah understood in a blink that Jill needed her to be the bad guy. The least she could do was to fit the part. "Because it's easier on me."

Jill wiped away a tear with a short laugh. "I didn't expect you to tell the truth." Shaking her head sharply, Jill gathered her things. "I have feelings for you, Hannah, and I don't know if I want to be just friends. I feel a little angry and hurt and I don't think I want to stay and talk about it."

"I'm sorry, Jill."

Jill nodded without meeting her eyes. "I'm going to stomp out now and stick you with the bill."

Wanting to introduce some levity, Hannah grinned. "Do you want to order anything to go first?"

A ghost of a smile flickered across Jill's face and Hannah watched her gracefully leave before dropping her head into her hands with a sigh. "I hope I did the right thing," she whispered to herself.

~***~

Hannah was keenly aware of the time as she settled her grandmother back into her room after their walk on Wednesday evening. She knew that if she left now she would arrive at the Hide Out with a few minutes to spare before Kelly started playing, but she fought her rising anticipation. Cricket lay curled up on the bed pillows but his eyes never left her. Her grandmother was talking about the flowers they had seen on their walk and gardens she'd had in years past, but Hannah was only vaguely aware. She wondered if Kelly were looking around the bar for her and if she would be disappointed that she wasn't there.

"What's gotten into you, girl?"

"Huh?" Hannah turned to see her grandmother's smile. "I'm sorry, Nana. I'm just a little excited, but I was listening. You were talking about violets as ground cover."

"That was ten minutes ago. What's got you in such a dither?"

Hannah pulled a chair over and sat down. "I'm going to watch Kelly play pool later."

Her grandmother looked over at the clock. "I thought she said it started at 7:30?"

"It does."

"Then what are you still doing here?"

Hannah crossed her legs and sat back. "Didn't you ever make Grandpa wait for you so you wouldn't appear too eager?"

After a moment's pause, Nana started to laugh. "It's like that, is it?"

"I mean, I've seen her around for years and never had any feelings for her, but all of a sudden she makes me weak in the knees. I don't understand it."

"No one understands love, honey. You either feel it or you don't."

"She's totally wrong for me, Nana."

Her grandmother looked genuinely surprised. "Why?"

"She's so...tall. And she's butch." Hannah pulled the scrunchy out of her hair and began to rearrange her curls. "It sounds so stupid when I say it out loud."

"It should. I thought you knew better than to judge people by their appearances. The face people show the world isn't the one they hide inside."

"I know, Nana."

"She didn't look butch to me," her grandmother said thoughtfully. "She looked strong."

"She is strong." Hannah remembered the muscles in Kelly's forearms dancing as she changed the solenoid in her car.

"Her clothes looked comfortable to me."

"I suppose so," Hannah agreed.

"Do you like crunchy foods?"

The shift in the conversation threw Hannah off for a moment, as she knew it was meant to. She wondered what point her grandmother was preparing to make. "Yes, I do."

"Some people don't."

Hannah played the game. "I wonder why?"

"Some folks are just too lazy to chew their food, but others have sensitive teeth. They may not even be aware that they have sensitive teeth, but over time they gradually eliminate crunchy foods from their diets."

"That's interesting."

"I wonder if folks who always dress for comfort are like the ones with sensitive teeth. Maybe their bodies are just more sensitive than most folks are. Now, it could be they're just lazy, but maybe not."

Hannah was surprised at the insight, especially in relation to Kelly. She also had to wonder if her grandmother was speaking with inside information gleaned from those talks years ago. "Hmm," she said thoughtfully. "That's fascinating." Hannah tried to fit this idea in with the rumor that Kelly was stone. They couldn't both be true, unless she had tired of 'crunchy' lovers. Hannah laughed out loud.

"I've got to go, Nana. If I make her wait too long she may not be there."

"Say hi to Kelly for me."

Hannah dropped a kiss on her forehead, called Cricket and ran for the car.

~***~

Hannah's heartbeat roared in her ears and she downed half of her drink in an effort to quiet it. The resulting loosening of her body was quite pleasurable and she smiled. Feeling reckless, she signaled for another drink and finished off the first.

Kelly walked slowly around the table, chalking her stick, and Hannah watched her closely. The table was studied carefully and when Kelly made her decisions she moved confidently into position. Hannah couldn't help but notice the grace and power in Kelly's hands and body. Each stroke was gently, but firmly executed. When she did finally miss a shot she appeared to be pleased with the placement of the cue ball and Hannah fathomed that it was what she intended.

The next woman to the table was sharp and bullish in the way she played. It looked as though she thought that if she hit the balls hard enough they would *have* to go in. Hannah smiled when the second one didn't. Kelly came back to the table and quickly ended the game. Hannah clapped with everyone else.

Listening to the chatter in the bar as the balls were gathered up and arranged, she learned that the first player to four wins would go on to the finals. She watched Kelly pick up a bottle of water and drink before slowly turning to survey the room. Knowing that Kelly would spot her soon, Hannah explored the feeling of excitement that flooded her and left her feeling defenseless. When Kelly's eyes found her she could feel a burning blush creeping up her throat and her vision narrowed to a tunnel that excluded the rest of the bar.

Yikes! I barely know this woman and one glance from her makes me feel happy. If I had ever felt even the tiniest part of this with Jill... Kelly's attention was pulled away by the game and Hannah felt her vision snap back to normal. She clutched the bar until her balance returned.

Kelly's poise fragmented and she lost Game #5. Hannah saw her become indecisive and graceless and wondered if Kelly had seen something in her face that had upset her. As her opponent readied for the break in Game #6, Kelly caught her eye with a shrug and a smile. Hannah smiled back encouragingly as Kelly tapped a man for a cigarette. He offered a light and Kelly shook her head.

Hannah wondered what she was doing as she stuck it in her mouth and turned back to the game. She could see that Kelly was drawing air through it now and then and Hannah didn't think it offered the same effects if it wasn't lit, but her game immediately improved. She had to work for it, but she took her fourth game and the bar cheered her.

Kelly tucked the unsmoked cigarette behind her ear and took her stick apart before putting it in a case. Hannah finished her third drink and considered before ordering another one. Two other women moved towards the table and Kelly picked up her things. Hannah waited anxiously as Kelly made her way through the room to her side.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks." Kelly set her case on the bar and asked the bartender for another bottle of water, then asked him to hold her case behind the bar. "So," she said as she turned back to Hannah, "I expected to see Jill here with you."

"I don't recall you inviting me to bring her."

"I didn't, but I still expected to see her with you."

"We're not dating anymore." Hannah watched Kelly carefully and while her face didn't change, Hannah could feel her satisfaction.

"Whose idea was that?"

"Mine," Hannah admitted. Wanting to change the subject, she indicated the pool table with a nod of her head. "Will you be playing the winner of this game in the final?"

"Yes, and unless she breaks an arm, the one with the flowery vest is going to win."

"You sound pretty sure."

Kelly grinned. "I'm positive. And I predict she'll beat me, too."

"Well, that's no way to think. She'll beat you for sure if you believe she will."

Kelly laughed. "That's Elizabeth Flynn. She's the best player in this part of the state. She only plays in tournaments so this is a great opportunity for me to see how good I really am. If I can win two games off of her I'll be thrilled and if I only win one I'll still go home happy."

"She's that good?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Shouldn't you be studying her game or something?"

Kelly kept her eyes on Hannah as she took a drink of her water. "Or something sounds better. Do you want to take a short walk?"

Cricket came to mind and she suggested that they let him run around for a bit. They ended up slowly pacing the alley beside the bar while Cricket ran around sniffing everything.

"You look really nice," Hannah ventured. The tall woman was wearing Dockers and a pink Polo shirt. The clothes fit her very well, but Hannah noticed that the sleeves were a little tight.

Kelly ducked her head before responding. "I'm scared to death I'm going to get smudged. I seem to attract grease and dirt no matter what I do."

"I have a similar problem with hair and lint."

Kelly laughed. "I wonder if it means anything that I chose a profession that puts me in touch with grease and dirt and you ended up grooming dogs."

Hannah grinned and found herself with nothing to say. The silence was uncomfortable mainly because the only thing she wanted to talk about was her growing attraction, but she was afraid to bring it up. Glancing at Kelly from the corner of her eye she spotted the cigarette behind her ear. "So, what's the deal with the cigarette?"

Kelly reached up and took it from her ear, rolling it gently between her fingertips as she spoke. "I'm trying to quit and sometimes it helps just to have it in my mouth. I'm down to five a day and I'm only allowed one more today so I'd like to put it off for as long as possible. I really needed one earlier and just having this was enough to get me centered."

"I wondered what happened. You looked so confident and in control one minute and the next you weren't."

Kelly returned the cigarette to its spot and grinned down at Hannah. "Seeing you at the bar really threw me off."

"Me?" Hannah was secretly pleased. "Maybe I should leave if I'm going to disrupt your game."

"I'd rather see you than win."

Hannah returned Kelly's bold gaze with a shy smile. "That's a sweet thing to say, but I'd like to see you win, too."

Kelly pushed her hands deep in her pockets with a shrug. "I'll do my best."

The alcohol in Hannah's system made her audacious. She watched herself reach out and run her hand slowly down the inside of Kelly's forearm. She felt the same softness over steel she remembered from the pizza parlor, but the skin seemed thinner here. Maybe it was that here she could feel tendons and ligaments. Individual muscles tensed and relaxed under her fingertips and

Hannah tugged to pull Kelly's hand free of her slacks so she could study it. Kelly's hand was much larger than her own and seemed to be made almost entirely of sinew and bone. The skin was dry and callused and her nails were short and square.

"Hannah."

She could hear Kelly, but couldn't look up. "I don't remember you from high school," she blurted out.

"Well, that's disappointing, but not unexpected," Kelly said quietly. "I was a nerd."

Hannah raised the strong hand to her face and closed her eyes. "I found you in my yearbook. I saw the swim team photos, but I don't remember you." She held the palm of Kelly's hand to her cheek, aware of each finger and where it lay.

"That's okay." Kelly's voice was deeper, more resonant. "I was a freshman and you were a senior. That's how high school is."

"I've seen you at events over the years: dances and dinners. I didn't even know your name." Kelly's thumb traced her eyebrow and Hannah caught her breath.

"None of that matters. I don't care about the past. I care about now."

A clatter in the alley startled them both and they turned to see Cricket playing with a discarded plastic drink bottle. He threw it up in the air and chased it with his nose, making a terrible ruckus. Hannah drew Kelly's hand from her face and laced their fingers together. They continued walking after Cricket.

"Have I ever, in all that time, been disrespectful or rude to you?" Hannah asked.

"I asked you out once and you said no," Kelly grinned. "It was horrible. I cried all night."

"Please tell me you didn't," Hannah begged.

"All right, so I didn't cry." Kelly squeezed her hand gently. "Actually, we did meet once, a long time ago."

"Is this a good story?" She looked up to see Kelly smiling fondly.

"I started out my high school career by cutting orientation, so on the first day of school I was trying to find my classes by using the map they mail you in the registration packet. I got turned around on the stairs and was completely lost between 2nd and 3rd period. I was supposed to be in English, but I was wandering around by the sciences and you stopped to help me."

"Are you sure it was me?"

"Positive. Anyway, you threw my map away saying it would make me a target for the

upperclassmen and explained how the different subjects were divided up and separated by the structure of the school. You walked me to my class and you didn't make me feel stupid. I never got lost again, but later that same day I saw another freshman getting teased over that same map."

"I don't remember any of that." Hannah felt bad and somehow guilty.

"Hey, you're supposed to feel good about yourself after hearing that story. It was the nicest thing anyone did for me in high school and I wouldn't trade the memory of it for anything. I knew that you didn't know who I was. At the time I didn't think I was worth remembering. I was a mess: I was struggling to understand why I felt so different and so alone. I didn't fit in my skin or in the world. I'm *glad* you don't remember me. I wrote horrible poetry and wore hideous clothes. I wasn't much fun to know until I realized I was gay and decided that it was a good thing."

Hannah watched Kelly lift their hands and kiss the back of her hand. She could feel the brief pressure of those lips like a shock throughout her whole body.

"Your grandmother was a lifeline for me. She listened to my poetry and my angst and made me feel not so stupid and ugly."

"How did you know she was my grandmother?"

"I didn't at first. I started out just going to watch you practice."

"Why?"

Kelly was quiet for a long moment. "Because you were nice to me once and I thought you were...cute."

Hannah grinned at Kelly's discomfort. "Did you have a crush on me?"

"You're going to tease me about this, aren't you?"

"Nobody ever had a crush on me before," Hannah giggled. "I think it's sweet."

"You know, I'm not fourteen anymore," Kelly warned.

"True," Hannah flirted. "But somewhere inside this handsome exterior is a fourteen year old girl who has a crush on me and I'll tease her if I want."

A huge grin split Kelly's face. "You think I'm handsome?"

"Do you still think I'm cute?"

They stood, daring each other with their eyes, until a door opened and the noise of the bar intruded.

"Hey, Kelly!" A man's voice called out.

"Yeah?"

"They're looking for you in here. Liz took Rhonda four nothin' and you're up in ten minutes."

"Thanks, Brian. I'll be right in."

Hannah noticed that Kelly had placed her body between her and the door. Whether it was to hide her or protect her she didn't know, but she realized it didn't matter. It was a sweet and chivalrous thing to do.

"You can go in and I'll take Cricket back to the car," Hannah offered.

"You shouldn't be outside alone."

"Don't be silly. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." Hannah turned and snapped her fingers and Cricket came running, his leash trailing on the ground.

"Okay," Kelly said. "But if you're not inside by the time the game starts I'm coming looking for you."

"I'll be there," Hannah promised as she picked up Cricket's leash.

"Hannah?"

She turned back at the question in Kelly's voice.

"How about a kiss for luck?"

Hannah tried to sound normal, but her knees were knocking. "I'll kiss you if you win."

"You don't understand how unlikely that is," Kelly protested.

Hannah stepped closer and ran a finger over her lips. "How bad do you want it?"

"Bad," Kelly breathed, her gaze intense.

Hannah started walking backwards. "I'll be rooting for you."

~***~

Kelly's eyes found her the instant she reentered the bar and Hannah wished she had kissed her when she had the chance. The people who remained to watch the final were clustered around the table so Hannah had a better choice of bar seats and she chose one closer to the action. A woman

her own age, but rounder of figure and rosier of feature was talking animatedly to Kelly and from their demeanor they were friends. Hannah wondered what they were saying and wished she could hear. It made her jealous to see someone else making Kelly smile.

She ordered another drink while listening with half an ear to the woman who introduced the players and explained that since Kelly's opponent had fewer losses during the tournament she was allowed to choose who would break. No one seemed surprised that Liz chose to do the honors herself, but surprise was evident in the crowd when nothing went in.

Hannah watched Kelly's bearing change as she walked slowly around the table. *She looks like a predator...or the arrow readied for flight.* Hannah held her breath as Kelly's long form bent over the table. She wondered if Kelly was aware of anything but the game. Taking her time and never lifting her eyes from the balls, Kelly sank one shot after the other. Hannah cheered as the eight ball fell into its pocket.

Kelly unleashed a powerful stroke to break the formation on the second game and two balls, a stripe and a solid, went in. Kelly considered the table for some time before choosing the stripes. Carefully planning each shot Kelly again cleared the table and the crowd began to talk about the possibility of an upset. But on the break for the third game, all of the balls remained on the table.

Kelly stood stoically to the side and waited as Liz began to play. Where Kelly seemed focused and resolute at the table, Liz seemed poised and delicate. There was an elegance to her playing that had to come from supreme self-assurance. With every ball that slid into its pocket, Hannah disliked her more. Arrogance seemed to emanate from her and Hannah felt it as a judgement on everyone in the bar, but especially on Kelly's ability.

Feeling more than a little drunk, Hannah grabbed a napkin off the bar and wrote on it carefully so the paper wouldn't tear. Searching through her purse she found some lip-gloss and, with her back to the game, applied it to her lips and pressed a kiss on the napkin under the words 'For Luck'. She leaned over and asked the nearest man to pass it to Kelly, then watched it pass from hand to hand around the room. It found its way into Kelly's hand at the same time that Liz won her first game. While everyone else was clapping and Liz was coolly ignoring their applause, Kelly opened the napkin and chuckled. The timing was perfect and Hannah was pleased to see that Liz was discomfited by it.

Kelly looked straight at Hannah and slipped the napkin inside her shirt next to her heart before resuming her pose with a lighter expression. Tickled with herself, Hannah relaxed against the bar and just enjoyed watching Kelly's long body in action.

Control over the table began to shift more frequently now as Liz won 2 more games and Kelly tied it at 3 each. Early in the seventh game, Liz surged ahead and showed signs of clearing the table when she banked her last solid a little too sharply and had to relinquish control. Kelly smoothly took over and in short order was sighting on the 8-ball. Hannah began to sweat as the tension peaked. Kelly gently stroked the cue ball and it nudged the eight into the side pocket. Hannah felt a surge of elation, then dread as the cue ball rolled just a little too forcefully down the table, hovered on the brink, then fell into the corner pocket.

~***~

"You guys are looking at this all wrong," Kelly interrupted.

Hannah sat across from Kelly with several other very disappointed people around the table. An argument was underway as to whether Liz had won or Kelly had lost. The only name she remembered was that of the woman who had been talking to Kelly prior to the match. Kelly had introduced her as Cantina and named her as Best Friend.

Kelly had her cigarette between her fingers, but it was still unlit. "You're right that Liz didn't *take* the win from me. I gave it to her by celebrating just a moment too soon. Liz wins as often as she does because she has the mental discipline it takes to stay focused until the trophy is in hand." She lifted the second place trophy before locking gazes with Hannah. "I started thinking about what I was going to win before I won it and that loss of concentration took it away from me."

The trophy was set down and Kelly folded her arms on the table. "What you fail to realize was that I played the best pool of my life tonight and for a moment, I had her. Never in a million years did I think I could win, but look at what happened. Not only did I give her the match; I ran the table two games in a row! I've never done that before."

"You were brilliant!" Cantina patted her on the shoulder.

Kelly smiled at her. "I was. I admit it."

Hannah joined in the laughter and teasing. She was quite drunk now and a little uncomfortable with so many new people. She waited until the others were concentrating on each other and carefully made her way to the bar.

"Do you have aspirin?" she asked when the bartender came.

"How many?"

"Better make it three, and some coffee." Hannah took a deep breath but it didn't clear her head at all. She felt someone's arm against her own and swung her head to see Kelly grinning at her. "What?"

"You're really wasted, aren't you?"

Hannah leaned back to see her better and almost fell off her stool. Kelly caught her around the waist and steadied her. "Yes," she stated as clearly as she could. "I am very drunk. I have not been drunk in a very long time. Have I embarrassed myself?"

"Not yet," Kelly laughed. "There's still time though."

"Don't let me look stupid in front of your friends," Hannah begged. "Promise me?" Kelly's hand

ran down her back and left a trail of heat.

"I promise." Kelly held her hand out. "Give me your car keys and I'll go get Cricket while you finish your coffee."

"Oh no," Hannah moaned as she dug in her pocket. "I forgot about Cricket. I'm a bad mother."
"You're not a bad mother, Hannah. Stay here and I'll be right back."

Hannah had just swallowed the aspirin when a hand clamped on her shoulder and Cantina sat down next to her.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Hannah hung her head as if in shame. "Nothing a baseball bat and a good night's sleep won't fix."

"Where did Kelly go?"

"To get my dog. He's been locked in the car since before the final. I forgot he was out there and now I feel like a bad mom."

"It's only been about an hour and a half. He'll be fine."

Hannah watched her as she ordered another beer. "Can I ask you a question?" At her nod she continued. "Is Cantina really your name?"

"Sort of. My little brother got confused when he was small and it just stuck. We think he heard my friends asking 'Can Tina come out and play?' Or 'Can Tina come over to my house?' And he got it in his head that Cantina was my name."

Hannah laughed. "It's kind of cute. Is that what I should call you?"

"All my friends call me Cantina. I always feel like I'm in trouble when folks call me Tina, but whatever you're comfortable with is fine by me."

"I like Cantina."

Lifting her beer Cantina took a long swallow. "Do you have a nickname?"

"Not really." Hannah suddenly pictured Freddie. "I have a friend named Freddie who calls me *Pelirroja*."

"Ooh! That's pretty. It sounds Spanish."

"I'm never sure with Freddie. He claims to be part Mexican but sometimes he makes up words. He says it means 'red headed girl'."

"*Pelirroja*." Cantina rolled the name around with her tongue. "I like it."

Hannah took a drink of her coffee. "Have you known Kelly for a long time?"

"Hmm," Cantina thought for a moment. "Six or seven years, I guess. We were housemates for a while when she moved here from New Mexico. You knew that she was in New Mexico for a while, right? She answered my ad in the paper for a roommate and we lived together for about a year and a half until I got married and had my twins. We've been friends ever since."

"Twins?"

"You want to see pictures?" Cantina asked hopefully.

Hannah nodded and let her pull out a handful of photo's featuring two beautiful and completely identical little girls. The bartender freshened up her coffee on his way by and she smiled and laughed as Cantina talked about her babies. Kelly came back after a bit wearing a jacket and Hannah grinned at seeing Cricket's happy little face peeking out. She kept an ear on Cantina's children and watched as Kelly discreetly showed Cricket to her other friends.

"They look a lot like you," Hannah said when Cantina wound down. "They have your beautiful skin, too."

"Thanks. I never really wanted kids until I held them in my arms for the first time, but now I can't imagine living without them. Do you have children?"

"No."

"Ever want any?"

"I've got Cricket."

Cantina looked confused. "Cricket?"

"My dog. He's currently hiding in Kelly's jacket." She pointed to where Kelly sat. "He's all the child I need or want. And the added bonus is that he'll never be a teenager."

Cantina groaned. "Please don't remind me. I was a horrible teenager and my mother cursed me. She can't wait for the two of them to drive me crazy as payback for how I treated her."

"Maybe they'll balance each other out," Hannah suggested. Though she was still very drunk she could feel that she had stopped getting more intoxicated. She felt hopeful that her morning wouldn't be too bad.

Kelly came over a few minutes later and recommended that she let her drive her home. Hannah offered to call a cab but Kelly declined. They said goodbye and every one congratulated Kelly again on a well-played game.

The ride home was quiet and Cricket stood on her lap to stare out the front window. Kelly walked her to the front door and pulled Hannah's keys out of her jacket before unerringly choosing the correct key and unlocking her house. Hannah leaned against the doorjamb and watched her.

"Do you want to come in?" She asked hopefully.

"Not tonight, I think," Kelly replied as she handed the keys over. "What time do you start work tomorrow?"

Hannah struggled to remember as Cricket ran around the front yard checking his territory. "I'm pretty sure my first appointment is at 8:00. I'll open the shop at 7:45."

"I'll bring your car back on my way to work then." Kelly put her hands in her jacket pockets and stepped back. "Are you going to be all right tonight?"

Hannah felt a hint of panic when she saw Kelly beginning to leave. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Kelly shook her head. "I didn't win, remember?"

"You won second," Hannah said quickly. "Besides, I didn't mean it to be taken liberally...*literally*," she corrected. Kelly took another step back and Hannah followed.

"*Very* tempting," Kelly persisted, "but I want to be sure you'll remember being kissed."

Hannah couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're really not going to kiss me?"

"I'm really not," Kelly grinned.

Anger flashed through Hannah. "You're getting even with me, aren't you? You're upset that I didn't kiss you when you asked and now you're getting even! Can you see how incredibly petty you're being?"

Kelly kept grinning. "I'm not getting even, Hannah."

"You don't want to kiss me? Fine! I don't want to kiss you either!"

"Yes, you do."

Hannah gaped for an instant. "You don't know half what you think you do. I do not need you standing on my property telling me what I want. What the hell was I thinking going after a butch dyke? I must be crazy!" The grin on Kelly's face was infuriating and Hannah stomped into her house to get away from it. Slamming the door was almost as satisfying as the scream of frustration she let out.

Hannah took a deep breath and heard a scratching on the door followed by a tiny voice.

"Please mommy? Let me come in?"

I forgot Cricket again and she's laughing at me, I just know it. Hannah yanked open the door to see her beloved dog held in front of Kelly's laughing face. She gently took Cricket, making sure Kelly saw her scowl before slamming the door again.

"I'll see you in the morning," Kelly called through the door.

"Don't bother!" Hannah screeched back.

"Lock your door, Hannah."

Hannah locked her door and stomped her feet.

Chapter Seven

With the coffee done brewing and only a slight feeling of queasiness to mark last night's overindulgence, Hannah unlocked the front door and sat down in her chair to drink the first of what she estimated would be several cups of black coffee. Cricket jumped into her lap and she gave him a carrot from the treat jar. He immediately settled down and began to chew it up.

With a quiet couple of minutes in front of her she turned her thoughts to the previous evening. She had been furious when Kelly had declined to kiss her and this morning she felt foolish and pitiful.

Did she think I was toying with her in the alley? Was I teasing her? I remember feeling a little scared and I thought I was being clever. Too clever by half as it turns out. Maybe she was following some code of conduct she learned in the military. She didn't win, after all. No, that can't be it. Maybe she doesn't like drunks and now I've blown it by turning into a lush. Thank God I quit drinking before I got sick. She probably thinks I have a drinking problem and I'll never see her again.

Why did I have to call her a butch dyke? I can't believe I was so rude. Nana would wash my mouth out with soap if she knew. I swear I'm never drinking again. Ever. I mean it!

If only I hadn't gotten scared. She wanted me to kiss her and I wanted it, too, but the closer she gets to me the harder it is to breathe and I panicked. If only I could live that moment over again,

I swear I'd...

The front door opened and Rooter, a Jack Russell/Poodle mix, pranced in followed by his owner, Blair. Shunting her thoughts out of the way, Hannah put her coffee cup down and reached for the excited dog.

"Well, good morning, Rooter! It's good to see you, too." She looked up at Blair. "Hey! Do you want some coffee?"

"I was hoping you'd ask," he said and reached for the pot. "I didn't have time for a cup at home. What is it with kids and losing their shoes?"

"You're asking the wrong person, Blair. I don't do kids." Hannah lifted Rooter to the trimming table. "What are we going to do with you today, Rooty Toot?"

"If you've got time he needs his feet trimmed and his belly shaved."

Hannah quickly ran her hands over the dog. "Maybe a little off around his face and ears?"

"I guess so. The wife is going to pick him up, okay?"

"Sure."

Blair thanked her for the coffee and hustled out the door. Rooter started to shake, as per usual. He had been coming in every two weeks for several years for a shampoo and whatever trimming he needed so he was resigned to the inevitable, but the idea of a bath always made him jittery. Hannah transferred him quickly to the bathing sink and started in on him.

She was towel drying him when she heard the bell over the door. Glancing over her shoulder she saw Kelly standing just inside the door with a red rose.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Oh Kelly, I'm so sorry." She kept a hand on Rooter so he wouldn't jump out. "I was so rude to you last night."

"Rude?" Kelly looked genuinely perplexed.

Hannah wrapped Rooter in a towel and moved him to a drying cage. "I called you a butch dyke and..."

"I am a butch dyke," Kelly smiled.

"You were nothing but nice to me and I teased you and called you names. I feel like such a jerk."

"I brought you a flower."

Hannah felt like her confession was slipping out of her grasp. "Well, thank you, it's lovely, but I'm trying to apologize."

"For what?"

"For being a jerk last night."

"You weren't a jerk," Kelly said as she laid the flower on the desk and started looking around. "You were a brat."

Hannah thought her eyes would pop. "What?"

"This is a nice place. Can I have a cup of coffee?"

Before she could respond Kelly had picked up a Styrofoam cup and was filling it. Hannah watched her doctor fill it with creamer and sugar. When she could speak she asked, "What did you call me?"

"A brat." Kelly leaned against the desk and crossed her feet.

"You come to my place of business, call me a brat and help yourself to my coffee and...and..." Hannah sputtered helplessly.

Kelly smiled. "You wanted to kiss me so bad that you literally threw a fit when I said no. It was the first time in my life that I was happy someone was mad at me." Kelly looked at her watch and set her coffee down.

Hannah's surprise was so complete that she didn't even try to evade Kelly's hands. In a flash, she was astride Kelly's crossed legs, Kelly's breath hot on her lips.

"I don't have much time before the cab gets here so I'm going to kiss you now," Kelly whispered. "Will you remember this?"

Unable to breathe, Hannah nodded. Her eyes closed as Kelly's mouth gently sampled her own. There was nothing butch about Kelly's lips. They were warm and soft and full and she tasted of corn flakes. Between kisses, Hannah could smell the clean scent of soap and cool skin. She put a hand to Kelly's hair and was surprised at how soft it was. She had assumed that it was bristly because it was so short.

All too soon, Kelly was releasing her. She lifted her fingers to Kelly's moist lips in wonder. "Wow."

"Are you still mad at me?" Kelly asked.

"Maybe later when I've had time to think about it," Hannah said quietly.

"Will you have dinner with me on Friday?"

"Of course." Hannah seemed to have no volition left.

"Seven?"

Hannah nodded absently, her eyes still locked on Kelly's mouth.

Kelly stopped at the door. "Hannah?"

She looked up into Kelly's serious eyes. "Yes?"

"The next time we kiss it will be because *you* initiate it. Just because I look butch doesn't mean I want to be in charge of everything. Okay?"

Clarity came slowly and brought a smile along. "Don't forget your coffee." She handed the cup over while making sure their fingers touched. "Thanks for bringing my car home."

"Anytime."

As the door closed Hannah began to wonder how Kelly had gotten the car started without the keys. She quickly opened it and called after her, "Hey! How *did* you get my car home?"

"Trade secret," Kelly laughed as she got into the cab.

Hannah waved and watched her drive off. She couldn't decide whether to dance or hug herself so she did both.

~***~

"...And then she kissed me," Hannah said into the phone.

"And?" Jay asked.

Hannah snuggled deeper into the couch and pulled the lap blanket up to her chin. "And then she left."

"Getting details out of you is like pulling teeth," Jay teased. "How was the kiss?"

Hannah could hear Freddie in the background. "What kiss?"

"Kelly kissed Hannah and she won't say anything about it," Jay explained.

"She tasted like corn flakes," Hannah offered.

"Corn flakes?"

"Yeah. Kind of sweet and wholesome."

Jay laughed and Hannah knew he had his hand over the phone by the muffled sound of it. "Sweet and wholesome, she says."

The phone sounded jiggled and Freddie's voice came on the line. "You sound like a Cheerio's commercial. We want to know if she made your toes curl up and smoke come out of your ears."

Hannah laughed. "It was very nice, Freddie. But it takes a little more than a single kiss to make my toes curl up."

"Women!" Freddie snorted. "Why do you have to make things so difficult? Either it was exciting or it wasn't!"

"It was exciting," Hannah laughed, "but don't try to pretend that you're an expert on women. Reading Cosmo doesn't make you an authority."

Freddie snorted. "I'll bet I've been with more women than you have."

"And more men, too."

"She's calling me a tramp, Jay." Freddie's voice lowered. "How many men have you been with?"

"None!"

"But, how do you know for sure if you don't try everything?"

"Don't be silly, Fred. It's not about sex, it's about love."

"One kiss and you're in love?"

"I didn't say that," she protested.

"You most certainly did. Here, talk to Jay."

Hannah gave a big sigh. "How do you put up with him, Jay?"

"He makes my toes curl up," Jay laughed.

~***~

Hannah was ready 45 minutes before Kelly was due to arrive and she fidgeted nervously the entire time. *Am I dressed okay? What if she shows up in jeans and here I am in a dress? I hope she doesn't try to take me bowling 'cause I'm really not dressed for it. I should have asked her*

what to wear but she had just gotten through kissing me and I couldn't remember my own name. And when should I kiss her? Should I do it right away or should I wait for the right moment? What if there is no right moment? Maybe I should change into higher heels. No, I don't want to look like I'm trying to be taller and besides, I'd probably twist an ankle and look like a dork.

Hannah caught herself chewing off a nail and ran to the bathroom to file it even, then started fussing over her hair. She worried that her dress was too nice and then that it wasn't nice enough.

With five minutes left she went to the front door and looked through the peephole. It afforded her a view of the street and she watched as Kelly's Chevy pulled up. Hannah began to relax as she watched Kelly check her watch, her hair, her collar and her teeth before checking her watch again. *She looks as nervous as I feel!*

When Kelly finally got out of the car, Hannah smiled at her black slacks and vest with long-sleeve blue shirt, noting that her clothes made her seem even slimmer and taller than usual. She decided that she liked it. As she approached the door, Hannah could see a slim gold chain around her long neck and she carried a small bouquet of wildflowers. Kelly stood at the door and checked her watch again before knocking.

Even though Hannah had seen it coming she still jumped and it made her laugh. Hiding behind the door, she opened it.

"Come in!"

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," she giggled. "It's too embarrassing."

Kelly bent over to pet Cricket. "What's she laughing about, boy? Anything I should know about? Something between my teeth maybe?"

"No," Hannah admitted. "I was watching you through the thing" she pointed to the peephole "and when you knocked it made me jump."

Kelly straightened. "You look very nice."

Hannah blushed with pleasure. "Thanks. I wasn't sure what to wear. We didn't talk about what we were going to do and I was afraid it would be bowling or something, in which case this dress would be totally inappropriate. But, on the other hand, if we were going to..."

"Hannah."

She made herself stop talking and looked into Kelly's face.

"These are for you."

Hannah reached out and took the proffered flowers. "Thank you, Kelly, but I don't have anything for you. I don't even know what you like."

"I like you," Kelly said with emphasis.

Unsure how to respond to that and maintain her dignity, Hannah took her flowers to the kitchen. She pulled a vase from under the sink and filled it with water. "I like your clothes," she called to the living room. "You look great in black." She dropped the wildflowers into the water and fluffed them.

Kelly spoke from only a few feet away. "This is okay then? I didn't want to embarrass you by being too butch."

Hannah shook her head and put the flowers on the dining table while she thought about what Kelly's words implied. She didn't want Kelly to be ashamed of being butch or worrying that she didn't like it. Maybe she had never been interested in a butch woman before, but she was now and she didn't want Kelly to change only to try to please her. After a moment to organize her thoughts she pulled a chair out from the table and held it for Kelly.

"Do we have time to sit for a minute?"

"Of course."

Hannah pulled another chair out to face her and sat down. When Kelly sat down in front of her, Hannah took one of her hands and turned it over to undo the cuff. She spoke as she neatly rolled the sleeve up. "I'm not embarrassed by you, Kelly. At first I was nervous with you because...well, I guess because you're different than any one else I've dated." Hannah stopped rolling just short of Kelly's elbow and straightened it carefully before starting the other one. "I'm finding out that I like how you look. It makes me feel..." she glanced up quickly then down again, "breathless."

After making sure that the rolled cuffs were even Hannah took one of Kelly's hands in hers and ran a hand over the muscled forearm. "I like your arms and hands. I like being able to see them. When you fixed that thing in my car I couldn't take my eyes off of them. Do you mind wearing your sleeves like this?"

Kelly cleared her throat. "I prefer it actually."

Hannah smiled. "By the way, where are we eating tonight?"

"We have a table on the terrace at the Park View Lounge for 7:30."

Hannah stood up, but didn't let go of her hand. "We'd better go."

"We have a few minutes," Kelly said.

Hannah looked down into her eyes and knew with complete certainty that Kelly was waiting to be kissed. She also knew that Kelly would not say or do anything else to encourage her. She could not remember ever feeling quite so vulnerable as she now did. With her free hand she tentatively stroked her fingers over Kelly's face and down her throat, then leaned over and softly kissed her. She pulled back to see Kelly's eyes closed in concentration and impulsively sat in her lap. With both hands she pulled Kelly's mouth to her own and teased her lips open. As her tongue darted into the sweet taste of her, Kelly's arms came around her and held her tight. The kiss became increasingly enthusiastic and Kelly was the one to break it with a gasp.

Hannah relaxed into the strength of the arms around her and buried her face in Kelly's neck. "That was nice."

"More than nice," Kelly muttered. "I'd really like it if we could do that again later."

"Me, too."

~***~

They were met at the door of the Park View Lounge by the hostess and escorted to their table without having to announce themselves. Hannah wondered if Kelly came often or if she had set up the entire scene in advance. A privacy screen had been set up so that no one in the restaurant could see them and sunset was not too far off. Hannah took a moment to enjoy the view before sitting down next to Kelly.

"I've never eaten here before. You must eat here a lot; the hostess didn't even have to ask your name."

"She knows my name," Kelly grinned, "because she's my sister."

"No way."

"It's true. Madeline is my next youngest sibling and the assistant manager here. She arranged all of this on the house, so feel free to have anything you like." Kelly opened a menu and laid it between them. "They make their own pasta here and it's very good. The seafood is supposed to be excellent and they make a wonderful salad with artichoke hearts and asparagus tips."

Hannah scooted her chair a little closer to Kelly and placed a hand on her thigh before leaning over to study the menu. "What's your favorite thing to eat here?"

Kelly put her hand along the back of Hannah's chair and began rubbing her back. "I like the Eggplant Parmesan with Alfredo noodles. That's probably what I'll order. Would you like some wine?"

"Oh, no," Hannah laughed. "I'm not ever drinking again."

"Why not?"

"After how I behaved the other night?"

"That won't happen again," Kelly chuckled.

"You're so sure of that?"

"I fully intend to kiss you later so it won't be necessary. I'm going to have a glass of white wine and you're welcome to join me."

"Kiss me now," Hannah demanded. Kelly's lips were on her throat when the hostess returned.

"I leave you alone for two minutes," Madeline said with amused indignation, "and it looks like I should have set up a bed out here."

"Can you do that?" Kelly laughed.

Hannah was mortified. "Don't you dare."

"You must be Hannah," Madeline extended her hand. "I'm Madeline. Don't let this big moose embarrass you. Her manners are atrocious, but she's really just a big softie. I've seen her cry at TV commercials for crying out loud."

"Don't pay any attention to her," Kelly whispered loudly. "She's the family idiot."

"Better the family idiot than the family freak," Madeline grinned.

Kelly clutched her chest dramatically. "Mom is going to switch you good for that."

"If she can catch me," Madeline boasted. "And if you tell her you're a snitch."

Hannah watched the conversation with great interest. Having never had a sibling she was always intrigued by how such relationships worked. This one seemed full of taunts and jibes that sounded hurtful, but appeared to be a front for great affection. It looked like fun and she wished she knew the first thing about joining in.

"I suppose you'll want rabbit food as usual," Madeline finally said to Kelly.

"The eggplant parmesan and the artichoke salad, please."

"What can I get for you, Hannah?"

"It all looks so good," she said. "What do you recommend?"

"Is there anything you won't eat?"

"I like everything."

Madeline thought for a second. "How about a filet mignon with sautéed mushrooms and wild rice?"

"Sounds wonderful."

"Wine?" Madeline asked.

Kelly waited for her nod before answering. "Two glasses of white, with dinner."

"Okay. You two behave yourselves and I'll be back in a bit with the salad."

Hannah waited until Madeline was gone then asked, "Are you a vegetarian?"

"Believe it or not," Kelly answered.

"Are you okay with me eating meat?"

Kelly waved a hand nonchalantly. "I don't have any ethical reasons for it. I just developed a sensitivity for meat while I was in the Army. It makes me feel icky."

"Icky?" Hannah smiled at her choice of word.

"You know, bloated and run down. Sometimes I even got stomachaches. I just feel better when I don't eat it. I wish I could eat it sometimes, but I don't have any problem with you eating it. If Madeline recommended it then it's probably really good."

"What do you do for protein?"

"Beans, eggs and cheeses mostly, but people don't need anywhere near as much protein as they think they do."

"How many siblings do you have?" Hannah reached out for a breadstick to munch on.

"I'm the third of five girls. Madeline is number four."

"I don't have any siblings."

"I know," Kelly said gently.

Hannah started to ask and realized that her grandmother probably told her a lot back when she was playing tennis. "Do you get along with all of them like that?"

"All but my next oldest sister. Her name is Jeanine and my dad used to call us the Molotov Twins. We can't spend more than a few minutes together without an explosion of one sort or another. I think she's bossy, selfish and insensitive and she thinks I'm unnatural and a sin against

God. Fortunately, she went to college back east and ended up married to a car salesman. I only see her every 2 or 3 years."

"Tell me about your family," Hannah encouraged her to talk. Madeline brought Kelly's salad and a sampler plate of appetizers, adding a few snarky comments about Kelly's memory before leaving them alone again. They playfully fed each other between kisses and Hannah wondered in passing at her need to be in constant contact. Kelly seemed totally at ease, but Hannah's skin alternately burned and ached with tension. She didn't feel ready yet to make love, but she wanted to be in Kelly's lap, her hands in her hair and the taste of her on her tongue.

Dinner came and everything was delicious. Except for the cut of beef, they tasted each other's food. Talk was suspended while the sun set over the mountains and Kelly lit the candles on the table.

"This is very romantic," Hannah said.

"I was hoping it would be. Sometimes you get your expectations going and when nothing works out, the only person you can blame is yourself, but everything has been perfect so far."

"What's your plan for after dinner?"

Kelly slowly sipped her wine before answering. "The truth is that I'm not sure. I didn't want to be too optimistic. What would you like to do?"

Hannah hesitated. She was a little afraid to say what she really wanted, but she decided that if she didn't ask she had no chance at all. "I want to sit in your lap and kiss and talk." She lifted her chin defiantly and waited.

A slow smile spread over Kelly's face. "And where would you like to do this?"

"I don't care."

Kelly stared off into the night for a long moment then smiled. "I have an idea about where we can go."

Hannah took the napkin from her lap and dropped it next to her plate. "I'm ready whenever you are."

~***~

Hannah looked doubtfully at the dirt trail before her. "Where does this go?"

Kelly turned on the flashlight and pointed off into the brush. "It's just a spot down by the river. It's an easy walk. Trust me?"

Hannah hitched the blankets Kelly had asked her to carry up under her arm and nodded. "Now

I'm curious, so lead on." She wasn't sure about this, but Kelly seemed to be.

As promised, it was a short, easy walk. The moon was just coming up so it wasn't completely dark and the river was close. She could hear it and the sound was soothing. Kelly stopped by a tree and in minutes a wide hammock was strung up. She then took one of the blankets and laid it over the mesh.

"This isn't quite what I had in mind," Hannah said.

"Give it five minutes and if you hate it we'll leave, okay?"

In five minutes Hannah was snuggled up to Kelly with the blanket flipped up over their legs and the sounds of the night competing with Kelly's heartbeat. With a deep sigh she relaxed and let her eyes close.

"Is this okay?" Kelly asked quietly.

"Better than okay," Hannah replied. A glass of wine and the moonlight loosened her tongue. "I don't know what it is about you, but I can't keep my hands off of you tonight. It's like I can only be sure you're real when I'm touching you. I can't remember ever needing to feel like this and I'm afraid you'll think I'm neurotic or obsessive."

"Are you?"

Hannah rubbed her hand over Kelly's flat stomach with a short laugh. "Maybe a little, do you mind?"

"Well," Kelly said slowly, "if you're going to start stalking me and peeking in my windows, let me know so I can at least make it interesting for you."

Hannah tickled her till she squeaked, then held her tightly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sounds serious."

Hannah casually worked at the buttons on Kelly's vest. "Have you heard any rumors about me?"

"None that I believe. Why?"

Hannah looked up at Kelly's moonlit face as a button came free. "What have you heard?"

Kelly brought fingers to her cheek and studied her. "Why do you want to talk about this?"

Hannah looked away and worked another button free.

"This is about me, isn't it?"

"I know that most rumors are just garbled nonsense, but they won't go away unless I know what's true. And if you've heard rumors about me, I want you to know the truth, too."

"It's okay, Hannah. Now is probably a good time to talk about all of this. What do you want to know?"

"I feel stupid even bringing it up. I feel like I'm betraying you already."

"Tell me."

"I heard you were in jail and that you have a restraining order against you," she said in a rush.

"What else?"

Hannah finished the last button and pushed the vest aside. "I don't want to say the other."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid that it'll be true and that if it isn't it will hurt your feelings."

"Say it anyway."

Hannah held her breath before speaking. "I heard that you don't let your lovers make love to you."

Kelly burst out laughing. "That's rich!"

Hannah smiled hopefully and started on the buttons of the blue shirt. "Jay Butterfield is one of my best friends. He wouldn't tell me anything, but he says he respects you. I'm assuming he was your lawyer for something."

Kelly continued to chuckle. "Well, that's good to know. You should know that there's at least a kernel of truth in all of those."

"Really?" Hannah had expected them all to be lies.

"Let's see: the first is the easiest to explain. I worked in a prison for a while. It was after I got out of the Army and I worked as a guard. I quit when I realized the damage I was doing to myself emotionally. Guarding prisoners takes a special kind of person and I didn't want to be that kind of person."

Hannah had several buttons undone and slipped her hand inside. She smiled at Kelly's sharp intake of breath. "Go on," she urged as Kelly's fingers began to tease the tiny hairs on her forearm.

"A couple of years ago I was living with a woman. I think I was attracted to my image of her

because she turned out to be the worst lover I ever had." Kelly laughed while remembering. "I can't tell you how bad she was. She was enthusiastic, but pretty quick I didn't let her touch me anymore because it was just so distressing. She was completely incapable of learning my body."

"So she started a rumor?"

"It sure sounds like it. The last two times I tried to sleep with someone they acted like it wasn't required of them. They must have heard the rumor, too."

Hannah smiled at Kelly's giggles. "You think it's funny?"

"I think it's hysterical! It just goes to show that if you hide how you feel about something, sooner or later it will come back and bite you in the ass."

Hannah was lightly stroking Kelly's lowest rib. "I'm very relieved to hear that it isn't true."

"Thanks for saying something. I would have been really upset if it had ruined things between us."

"So, what's the real truth about the restraining order?"

"Well, that same woman stole something from me when she moved out. I, of course, went to her new place and banged on the door demanding it back and she called the cops on me. I've never hurt anyone in anger and I never would have hurt her, but I wanted it back pretty bad. The next day she applied for a restraining order claiming that I threatened her and she was afraid for her life. I hired Jay Butterfield as my attorney in a civil case to get my property back."

"Did you win?"

"Of course. It was mine and I could prove it. He also got me damages because she messed it up before returning it. She moved away about a year and a half ago so I'm not sure if the restraining order is still effective or not. I should probably look into that."

"What was it?"

"Hmm?" Kelly asked.

"Your property. What was it?"

For the first time Kelly seemed a bit nervous. "Oh, it was just this thing I made for one of my nieces. I don't even have it anymore."

Hannah started to push for information, but Kelly had been more than forthcoming about everything else. Whatever it was, it was given to a child so it likely wasn't anything ugly or perverted. "Thanks for telling me the truth. I hope you don't feel like I was judging you based on what other people said."

"I don't. Rumors are what lesbians do when their feelings get hurt. Maybe not on an individual basis, but the community seems to support it. It's one of the things I don't like about being 'in the life'."

"What have you heard about me?"

"If you're in the mood to talk the only thing I would like to know about is Brenda and what happened. I know it hasn't been very long, but I'm curious."

Just thinking about it made Hannah want to cry. "I don't know what happened."

"Are you still in love with her?"

"I don't know." Hannah's heart felt sick to be talking about loving someone else while in another woman's arms. "Sometimes I'm so angry I can't see straight and other times I feel like I've been trampled by something big. At first I had to sleep with the radio on because the house was too quiet, but I've gotten past that. I wake up almost every night reaching out to the other side of the bed and I don't know if it's that I'm missing her or surprise that no one's there."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. One night we made love and everything was fine. The next day she came home from work and told me she was in love with someone she had been chatting with online and they were going to be together. She packed her things and drove away. I just recently found out that she gave notice at her job. I didn't even know that. I still don't know at what point she decided she didn't love me. How long did I live in a fantasy world while she was plotting her escape?"

Hannah wiped tears away with her fingers. "This whole thing has been just like my mother."

Kelly adjusted herself so they were facing each other and pulled the blanket around them both. "Tell me about your mom. How is it the same?"

"I grew up believing that no matter how bad a mother she was, she kept me with her because she loved me."

"I'm sure she did."

"But that's just it! She didn't love me, ever. I think she kept me with her out of spite. She didn't want anyone else to enjoy me, especially her mother."

"Mrs. Archer?"

Hannah nodded. "If not for her, I don't know what would have happened to me. She was the one best thing about my childhood."

Kelly tenderly wiped away her tears. "So, how is Brenda like your mom? Do you think she never loved you either?"

"Probably not. I've had a lot of time to think about it and I see things I couldn't see before. We did make love the night before she left, but now that I can look at it from a distance her attentiveness stands out as unusual. She hardly ever said she loved me. Mostly I would say it to her and she would say 'I know'. I took it to mean that she was secure in our love for each other, but now I'm thinking it was just her way of avoiding saying it back. And we never talked about feelings. We talked about plans and finances and work, but we never really just talked. And we laughed at things on television but we rarely laughed with each other." Hannah put her arms around Kelly and tucked herself under her chin. "I think my expectations of love are inadequate."

"I'm just guessing, but I think you don't believe that you deserve to be loved; and I have to tell you-if that's what you think, you're dead wrong. You are completely lovable and you should work on those expectations. The love you'll get is exactly as much love as you're willing to settle for."

Hannah lay quietly: the clean smell of Kelly's skin all around her and the sound of the river and a million crickets in her ears. I feel safe, she thought. After a few minutes of enjoying the feeling, she lifted her chin and Kelly met her in a kiss.

~***~

She woke up with her head on Kelly's shoulder; the morning sky just beginning to indicate that dawn was on its way. The crickets were quiet, but the river continued to gurgle and a slight breeze was making itself heard in the leaves above her. Hannah gingerly lifted herself onto her elbow and looked around at the small clearing. *What a beautiful place to wake up!*

Kelly lay with an arm raised over her head, her face softened with sleep. Hannah held her breath as she studied the contours of her face. She knew that women the world over coveted Kelly's skin. After a closer look she knew that they would want her long, thick eyelashes, too. The full, slightly parted lips were entirely too tempting to pass up and Hannah wet her own before placing them over Kelly's. It was only a moment before Kelly responded with a groan. The kiss began with urgency, but gradually became one of sensual leisure. The longer it went on the more intoxicated Hannah felt until she finally had to pull back or risk falling out of the hammock.

"If I go back to sleep," Kelly whispered into her hair, "will you wake me up again?"

Hannah giggled. "I've never slept outside before."

"It's nice, isn't it?"

"My feet are a little cold and I really need to go to the bathroom, but the rest of it is marvelous."

"Well, you can either pick a bush or I can take you home."

Hannah weighed her need for a bathroom with her need to stay where she was. "If we go to my house can I make you coffee and breakfast?"

Kelly started to sit up. "Can you make pancakes?"

"Of course. Is that what you want?"

"I love pancakes," Kelly said. "I can't cook to save my life so I buy frozen waffles, but it's just not the same."

Hannah rested her head on her arm and watched Kelly stretch. All but two of her shirt buttons were undone and she could see the smooth skin of Kelly's stomach. "This is the best date I've ever been on."

Kelly's smile almost painful in its intensity. "You couldn't have said anything better."

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~ Rumors ~

by BadSquirrel

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Chapter Eight

Hannah made palm-size pancakes until Kelly begged her to stop. It felt really good to cook for someone who was so genuinely appreciative about the food. Kelly kissed her soundly for making breakfast and kissed her again because she would miss her for the rest of the day, then left with just enough time to get to work. Hannah mentioned that it was Saturday, but Kelly explained that she had agreed to work on a friend's car.

After she left, Hannah took a shower, turned on the radio and started cleaning house. Cricket stuck close to her all day and she stopped to pick him up frequently for kisses and hugs. Jay and Freddie called in the early afternoon to find out how the date went and teased her unmercifully about staying out all night. Hannah let them have their fun knowing that there was no way she could explain how unexpectedly enjoyable the entire night had been. Not once had she felt inadequate or judged unworthy. No pressure had been placed on her to fulfill Kelly's

expectations and Kelly had exceeded her own hopes for the night. It was just so easy to be with her.

Hannah replayed every word they had exchanged in her mind. One particular sentence Kelly had said kept repeating itself. *The love you'll get is exactly as much love as you're willing to settle for.* The more times those words reverberated in her head, the more her heart absorbed them. She began to understand that starting with her mother she had accepted some very substandard loving because she was afraid to expect more. There had never been any reason to believe that she would get it.

The love you'll get is exactly as much love as you're willing to settle for. Her grandmother had been the one glaring exception in her life. From the moment of their meeting in that long ago lobby she had been attentive and loving. It had taken a long time for Hannah to return her grandmother's love and now she recognized within herself a fear that if she did not actively labor to deserve that love it would go away. She knew intellectually that her grandmother really did love her and wouldn't stop, but the little girl in her heart was still suspicious.

~***~

After several days of silence it occurred to Hannah that Kelly might be waiting by the phone, too. The insight was so startling that she immediately decided to call.

"Auto shop," the gruff voice said on the other end of the line.

"Um..." Uncertainty ambushed her. "I need to leave a message for Kelly?"

The phone clattered on a desk and she heard "Lowell?" yelled in the background. After several minutes she could hear Kelly faintly.

"What is it?"

"Some woman," the gruff voice said distantly. "You know the rule. No personal calls."

"Bite me, Merle."

"One of these days I'm gonna fire you, Lowell."

"I'm praying for the day." Kelly said with good-natured sarcasm.

Hannah felt a tickle of panic that she had put Kelly's job in danger.

The phone was juggled briefly and her voice came on the line. "This is Kelly. How may I help you?"

"I just wanted to leave you a message," she explained quickly. "I'm sorry if I got you in trouble with your boss."

"Hannah!" Kelly said with evident pleasure. "Don't mind Merle; he's just jealous. I'm really glad you called."

"I can call you later if that would be better."

"Really, it's okay."

"Your boss sounds kind of upset."

Kelly laughed. "Merle suffers from Personality Deficit Disorder. He can't help the way he is. Fortunately, he self-medicates with beer."

"Does that work?"

"Not nearly as well as he thinks it does." Kelly laughed again. "Okay, he's gone. I'll bet he repeats that joke to everyone by the time I get off the phone. He loves to mess with me 'cause I'm not afraid of him. I had a seriously deranged drill sergeant in the Army and everybody else seems tame in comparison."

Now that she had her on the phone Hannah wasn't sure what to say.

"I've missed you," Kelly said softly into the silence.

"I miss you, too. Were you waiting for me to call?"

"I was hoping you would, but I was going to call you tomorrow night if you didn't. I'm trying to balance hard-to-get and desperate-to-see-you."

Hannah sighed in relief. "I want to see you, too. Maybe you could come to dinner tonight?"

"What time?"

"As soon as you can."

~***~

Kelly arrived, freshly scrubbed, before Hannah even started on her last appointment. She felt embarrassed at how good she felt just seeing Kelly.

"Should I come back later?"

"No," Hannah said shyly. "Have a seat. Have some coffee. If you open that door," she pointed, "you can let Cricket in. I'm sure he'd love some attention. He seems to have taken a real shine to you." With great difficulty she turned back to the poodle on the table and continued to trim her muzzle. "You got here sooner than I expected. I've still got about an hour of work."

"I thought maybe I could watch you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Resisting the desire to crawl into her lap, Hannah said no. She watched Kelly play with Cricket as she worked and they visited. She allowed herself a few minutes in Kelly's arms while her last dog was in the drying cage and Cricket insinuated himself into every kiss. She was still laughing when her work was done and the door was locked.

"I want to change my clothes," Hannah said as she led Kelly into her home. "Hair works its way into everything and if I don't change I'll itch all night."

"By all means," Kelly grinned. "I'll have Cricket keep me company."

Hannah rushed through a sponge bath and brushed her teeth, then pulled on jeans and a T-shirt. She struggled with her hair for a few minutes and gave up in frustration. A scrunchy pulled it out of her face and she decided it would have to do.

Kelly was playing 'Fetch' with Cricket and his favorite toy when she came out. The way Kelly was sitting on the couch was possibly the most erotic pose Hannah had ever seen. It was actually more of a slouch than a pose, but those unimaginably long legs changed everything. Hannah had never considered herself drawn to one part of a woman's body over another, but the idea of being partial was gaining momentum. She studied the length of Kelly's upper leg as she headed for the kitchen and knew she had never noticed anyone's femur before.

She quickly threw together a salad comprised of a little of every vegetable she had in her refrigerator and baked some corn muffins to go with it. A can of minestrone soup completed the meal and Kelly ate with gusto. Hannah picked at her food, too busy watching Kelly to concentrate and too happy just to see her. The rest of the evening was spent playing cards and watching Law and Order on television.

"I should probably go home," Kelly sighed. "We've both got to work tomorrow."

Hannah pointed the remote at the TV and turned it off. "When do I get to see you again?"

"Well," Kelly drawled, "I was thinking it might be fun to have a picnic this weekend at a little spot I know."

Hannah smiled and picked Kelly's hand from her shoulder to bring it to her mouth. "A picnic sounds nice." She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling of rough knuckles rubbing over her lips. "What should I bring?"

"Nothing."

Hannah shivered as Kelly's whisper crawled around her ear and made the hairs on her arms stand up. She relaxed and let Kelly maneuver her into those strong arms. She slipped an arm around her waist and slid the other one into Kelly's hair as their lips met. As their tongues slid around

each other an ache started deep inside her chest making it hard to catch her breath.

"So wild," Kelly whispered against her mouth.

Hannah breathed in the taste of those words and recaptured Kelly's lips with her own. She couldn't get enough of the taste and feel of her mouth. Kelly invoked a passion in her that had never risen so swiftly or powerfully. As much as she wanted to explore it, she was afraid of it, too. Just along the edges of it, like she was now, she felt her Self dissolving. She had always enjoyed her sex life, but she realized that she had always been in control of what she felt and now she was faced with the loss of that control and who she would be after surrendering was a frightful mystery.

With an internal groan, Hannah pulled her mouth away and sat up. The craving in Kelly's face was brutal in its honesty and her lips looked swollen. "I'm sorry, Kelly."

"It's okay," Kelly rasped. "I didn't mean to..."

"No," Hannah said quickly. "I just...I got scared."

Pain flooded Kelly's features. "Of me?"

Hannah fell back into Kelly's arms and buried her face on her shoulder. "Of how I feel, Kelly. Not of you, never of you." She sighed as Kelly's arms came around her and she could feel hot breath on her neck. "You make me feel...it's so strong and so fast and it's never been like that before. I've never felt anything like it and I'm afraid that I'll disappear into you; that I won't be me anymore."

"Don't be afraid of that," Kelly said quietly. "I won't take you anywhere you can't come back from. I promise I'll always bring you home."

Kelly's tranquil assurance pierced Hannah to the core and released a spasm of longing. All of the uncertainties of her life boiled up behind it and only the strength of Kelly's arms kept her from bolting in fear. Tears leaked from her eyes as Kelly began to rock her. Hannah placed her hand over Kelly's heart and willed herself to feel it beating. Slowly she began to relax and let a wave of comfort roll over her.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," she mumbled. "I don't mean to be so much trouble."

"Oh, Hannah," Kelly chuckled. "This is bliss. I could build a life around moments like this. You can trouble me anytime."

Hannah pushed back a little and looked up into Kelly's eyes. "I'm not a tease, you know." Kelly's fingers moved up to brush hair from her forehead.

"I never thought you were," Kelly said with a little smile. "Making love is a wonderful thing, but it's only a small part of what I want with you."

Afraid to hear the answer, Hannah asked anyway. "What do you want with me?"

Kelly grinned wickedly. "For starters, I want to take you on a picnic on Saturday. Is that a good day for you?"

Hannah nodded as Kelly's fingertips traced her lips. She could still feel them after Kelly had gone home and she prepared for bed.

~***~

Unsure what the day would bring, Hannah went out early and dropped Cricket off with Nana. She spent a few minutes saying hello to the other residents and assuring them she would be there bright and early the next day to make breakfast.

The sky was clear and bright and even this early in the day she could feel that it would be hot later on. With an hour and a half to go before Kelly picked her up, Hannah carefully shaved her legs and worked her unruly hair into a semblance of order. It still looked like she had paid a visit to the Albert Einstein Hair Emporium, but she knew from experience that it rarely looked better no matter how you cut it. Wearing her favorite shorts and a tank top, she went out front to wait and picked up the garden hose to water her yard.

Kelly pulled up right on time in an old, rusty Blazer and hung out the window to wolf whistle at her. "Hey, sweet thing! Wanna ride?"

Hannah rolled her eyes and hid a smile. "My Nana warned me about people like you," she teased.

Kelly turned off the motor and rested her chin on her arms. "And what, exactly, did she tell you?"

Hannah turned off the water and walked slowly over to the car. "She told me to make lots of mistakes when I'm young so I'll have plenty of things to remember fondly when I'm old."

"Am I a mistake?" Kelly asked with a glimmer of uncertainty.

Hannah leaned against the car door and ran a hand over Kelly's short hair. "It's hard to say. You look a little dangerous to me."

"Only a little?" Kelly asked in mock surprise. "How about you come for a ride with me and we'll see if I can convince you to upgrade your opinion of me."

Hannah laughed and ran around to climb into the Blazer.

"Where's Cricket?"

"He's spending the day with Nana."

Kelly started up the vehicle with a wicked grin. "So, you're completely defenseless."

"Hardly," Hannah sniffed recklessly. "I am a bona fide mistress in the ancient Sapphic art of Tongue Fu. I can take care of myself."

"Tongue Fu?" Kelly snorted with laughter. "What belt are you?"

"Belt?" Hannah flipped imaginary hair haughtily. She could feel a blush attempting to surface and tried to ignore it. "There are no belts in Tongue Fu, you silly girl." It was rather out of character for Hannah to tease verbally this early in a friendship, especially one in which the exact nature of the friendship was still undetermined, but Kelly's evident pleasure in it goaded her on. "There are only mistresses and supplicants."

"And I would be...?" Kelly waggled an eyebrow suggestively.

"That remains to be seen," Hannah said primly.

~***~

By the time they reached the edge of a meadow at the end of a long retired logging road an hour later, Hannah felt as though she had spent the morning in a blender. "Do you come up here often?"

"Several times every summer." Kelly pointed off between some trees. "We still have to walk a couple of hundred yards that way to get where we're going."

"I've never been up here before."

"I'm not surprised." Kelly left her car keys in the ignition and got out of the Blazer to stretch. "I've never seen anyone up here but me. I found my way out here just after I got out of high school."

Hannah got out of the car and waited for Kelly to continue.

"I was trying on my independence and needed a place where I could just think for a few days. This was where I decided to go into the Army. Of course, I hiked up from that last fork we passed. I didn't know at the time that I could get this far."

"We passed a fork?" Hannah asked in disbelief. "I wasn't sure we were even on a road."

"Well, that was 12 or 13 years ago. Stuff grew since then."

Hannah rolled her eyes as Kelly opened the back gate and shrugged on a large hiking pack. "Can I help carry something?"

Kelly pulled a cooler out and set it on the ground. "I was hoping you would carry the other end of this."

Hannah picked up her end and followed Kelly over ground that had obviously never been a path. Clusters of alders shaded them from the sun and she realized that she could hear water. "Is there a creek ahead?"

"It's the north fork of the Delano River. I think you'll like it."

With one hand on the cooler handle and the other keeping brush from slapping her in the face, Hannah did her best to keep up. The noise of the water got louder, but remained gentle in tone. The ground under her feet changed from earth to sand in one step and she looked up to see where she had come to. Kelly had stopped walking and Hannah set her end of the cooler down so she could walk further out into the clearing.

She stood on a sandy beach on the outside edge of a curve of the river. Trees formed a wall at her back and substantial rock formations stood guard at each end. Across the water was a stunning, moss-covered stone face with a fringe of thick trees covering the mountain that rose behind it. The water was exquisitely clear and the river curved out of sight leaving Hannah standing in a secluded pocket of paradise. Tension washed out of her and she closed her eyes to take a deep breath, letting her spirit connect with the beauty that surrounded her.

"What do you think?" Kelly asked from just behind her.

Hannah opened her eyes for another look. "It's absolutely beautiful."

"You're the only person I've ever brought here."

Hannah wondered if that was as significant as it sounded. "Thank you for sharing this with me. I've never seen anything so...so..." She stumbled to a verbal halt.

"Yeah," Kelly said. "It gets me like that, too."

Hannah looked over her shoulder to see Kelly looking up at the mountain before them. Her usually rugged face had softened and Hannah could see anticipation in her gaze. Kelly suddenly turned away and dragged the cooler over to a flat spot next to the southern rock formation and dropped the pack down next to it. Hannah watched as the pack was opened and a blanket was pulled out and spread half in the sun and half in the shade. Beach towels were dropped on one corner with sun block.

"I wasn't sure what you would like to drink," Kelly said as she opened the cooler. "So I brought beer and bottled water. There's a ton of food in here, including some of my mom's fabulous fried chicken. Just dig in and make yourself at home."

Hannah took off her shoes and sat down on the blanket. Hugging her knees she let her eyes roam.

"This is really nice, Kelly. I can't believe other people don't come here."

"About a half mile north is a waterfall. We can walk up there later if you like, it's very pretty; but best of all, it's impassable. You can't raft down it and it's not worth portaging around it. Most of the river between here and there is not worth putting a raft in the water. Now, six or eight miles downstream there's a *great* spot to start rafting and if you're adventurous, or stupid, you can follow it all the way through town. I've never seen anything to indicate that other people come here." Kelly slipped off her sneakers and tossed them over by the backpack. "I can say with a great deal of confidence that we are...completely...alone."

The intensity of Kelly's eyes made Hannah catch her breath. She watched as Kelly took off her socks and just as casually removed her shirt. Hannah felt her heart lurch as firm breasts fell free in the sun. She had to swallow before she could speak. "What are you doing?"

With a single practiced flip of her hand, Kelly unbuttoned her Levi's and began to pull them down over her hips. "I'm going swimming. Feel free to join me."

Kelly didn't seem to care if she stared or not, so Hannah let her eyes feast. Salmon-colored nipples tightened in the slight breeze and seemed to pull Kelly's breasts tighter against her chest. Her taut belly and muscular legs met at the thickest bush of dark hair Hannah had ever seen. She admitted to herself that she had actually seen very few, but she knew that this one was unusual. She studied Kelly's hips as she walked smoothly to the water's edge and wondered how they could look so slim in jeans and so deliciously abundant in broad daylight.

Kelly walked straight into the river and at waist deep dove below the surface. Hannah took a much-needed breath and tried to massage the ache in her chest. "My God!" She whispered fervently. "Who knew?"

She shook her head in an effort to clear it before Kelly reappeared and examined the river to see where she would come up. After what felt like five minutes but could only have been about two, Hannah jumped to her feet and approached the water. "Kelly!" Worried now, Hannah looked the length of the river and called her again. Just as she began to panic she saw Kelly pop up across the water and reach for a handhold on the cliff face. Relief washed through her, followed by irritation. "You scared the hell out of me!" she called.

Kelly turned to look over her shoulder. "Why?"

"You were under for a long time. I didn't know if you were in trouble."

Kelly laughed and began to pull herself up the rock. "Well, don't worry. I can stay under longer than that." She stopped climbing and looked back across the water. "Were you going to save me?"

Embarrassed, Hannah folded her arms tightly. "I can't swim."

"What?" Kelly called back.

"I can't swim!" Hannah felt stupid and small and resented it.

Kelly held still for a moment and then looked up at the rock above her. Adjusting her position so she could turn more easily she called out, "I am going to crawl up there a bit and dive off. I checked the bottom and it's clear. If I'm not up in 10 seconds you can panic. Okay?"

Hannah tried to see where Kelly would dive from. "Is it safe? Because I'll be no help if you get into trouble."

"I promise it will be okay."

Hannah nodded and Kelly began to quickly climb. At about 25 feet off the water she carefully turned around on a tiny projection. Hannah wished she had a camera. Kelly looked like a work of art up on that ledge. Her heart was in her throat as Kelly arced out into the air and followed her hands into the water. Scant seconds later Kelly broke the surface with a whoop of enjoyment. Hannah laughed in vicarious delight. With smooth, practiced strokes Kelly pulled herself through the current and came to her feet in water up to her waist. Hannah watched water sluicing down that incredible body and backed up involuntarily as she approached.

"I didn't know you couldn't swim," Kelly said as she wiped water from her eyes. "I'm sorry I scared you."

With enormous effort Hannah kept her eyes on Kelly's face. "I just never learned. There was no opportunity when I was small and I had other interests after I moved here."

"I could teach you," Kelly offered hopefully.

Hannah shook her head nervously. "No...I...no. Maybe in a pool or something, but I'd be too scared to do it in the river. The current is too strong."

"Okay. Are you going to get in the water at all? It would be a shame if I dragged you all the way out here just so you could sit on the beach. The current isn't bad along shore, it's mostly over on that side of the river."

Hannah let Kelly convince her and shyly turned her back before taking off her clothes. Leaving them in a pile away from the water's edge she put her hand in Kelly's and let her lead the way into the cool water. As it crept up her thighs she rose up on her toes with a gasp. "It's cold!"

Kelly grinned. "If you can make yourself get in all at once you'll warm up faster."

Hannah inched forward with a grimace. "I can't. It's just too cold."

"Take your time," Kelly said as she let go of her hand and eased into the water. She turned and looked Hannah up and down. "You don't mind if I watch, do you?"

Hannah felt more naked and exposed than ever before in her life, but she didn't want Kelly to know it. "This could take a while," she warned.

"Good."

Hannah's insecurities blossomed. Fighting the urge to cover herself with her hands she forced herself to take a step deeper into the water. The water was almost warm on her legs, but the surface seemed like ice on her skin.

"Your breasts are lovely," Kelly said in a husky voice.

Hannah froze uncertainly.

"I like the shape and size of them," Kelly continued easily. "They're not too big or too small. They seem to be the perfect size for your body."

Hannah's limbs loosened at the intimacy of the words and she wondered at the warmth that flooded her.

"I especially like your nipples. They're a beautiful shade of pink and they don't seem to mind being noticed." Kelly's tongue darted out to wet her lips. "I love the freckles, too. Quite adorable."

Hannah felt as though Kelly had just run her hands all over her. She was hyper aware of her skin and could feel the tightness of her nipples. She tried to take a calming breath, but she couldn't get enough air and when she tried to say Kelly's name no sound emerged.

"I've never seen red pubic hair before." Kelly's voice was hard and strained now. "It sure doesn't hide much."

Oblivious of the water, Hannah reached for Kelly with her whole body and Kelly met her halfway to sweep her up in strong arms. Their flesh met hungrily and Hannah wrapped her legs around Kelly's waist as their mouths met. Straining to be closer, Hannah arched into her as her hands clawed at Kelly's back. She felt almost desperate in her desire and each moment her passion expanded exponentially.

Hooking an arm around Kelly's neck she brought her other hand between them and cupped a breast in her hand. She could feel the hard nipple jutting into her palm and her own pressing into the back of her hand. Her kisses turned into sharp little bites along Kelly's jaw and throat. She had to struggle to keep them light.

Kelly dropped to her knees and Hannah braced herself for the shock of cold water only to feel the blanket under her back. She wondered briefly at how they had gotten this far, but Kelly's body pressing her into the sand and her hips driving into her pushed such technicalities far away. A simple twist of her shoulders placed her mouth at Kelly's breast and she eagerly took the nipple into her mouth. Her heart smiled as Kelly groaned. Using both hands she reached down to

grasp Kelly's ass and force her to move harder and faster. She could feel Kelly's heartbeat on her tongue and the sound of her name was like music reverberating from the mountains as Kelly shuddered and collapsed to the side. Hannah followed and raked her hands over Kelly's ribs as she used her mouth to lick and nip at Kelly's mouth. For a long moment Kelly was unresponsive and Hannah's need was on the edge of pain. She took one of Kelly's hands and pushed it down between her legs. "Please," she begged.

Kelly's eyes opened and Hannah was glad to see that Kelly understood how much she needed release. "I'm sorry, Hannah," Kelly said as she rolled her onto her back. "Tell me what to do."

"Make me..." Hannah gasped. As Kelly's fingers began to work a new kind of magic, Hannah pulled the hot mouth to her breasts and held on.

~***~

The sun block was hot from lying in the sun and Hannah purred as Kelly squeezed a line of it down her spine. Strong hands gently worked the lotion into her back and Hannah gave herself into their care. "I can't remember ever feeling this relaxed."

"Surely there was at least once," Kelly teased.

"I've felt good before," Hannah conceded, "but I'm pretty sure I never felt quite like this." Kelly's hands slid over her ass and Hannah giggled. She rolled over and saw Kelly grinning back at her. Lifting one leg she invited Kelly to continue her ministrations. Hannah watched her boldly as a hand slid up the inside of her thigh. "You're good at this," she said quietly.

"I've been dreaming about this for a long time," Kelly said simply.

"How long?" Hannah teased.

"Most of my life."

An uncomfortable feeling wormed its way through her consciousness. "Are you serious?"

Kelly looked up warily. "Is that weird?"

"No," Hannah said carefully. "But it does make me feel a little cautious."

Kelly started her other leg. "I'll not put any strings on you, Hannah. You are not responsible for my feelings."

She couldn't resist asking, "What are your feelings?"

Kelly's hands stilled for a moment. "I've loved you from afar since I was 14 years old. I've never been able to explain or justify it because I never really knew you." Hands continued their task. "I've had lovers and I've cared about some of them, but I've never loved anyone else. I've always

wondered if I loved you or my image of you."

Hannah waited for Kelly to continue, but she only filled her hands with more of the hot lotion. "What do you think now?"

Kelly straddled her thighs and began rubbing her belly with a little smile. "It's hard to know how you feel when passion takes over, but I've enjoyed getting to know you better. There are all kinds of little things that I didn't know about you and every time something new comes up I have to laugh at myself. I'm finding that the image I had of you is only a small part of who you are and I like what I'm learning." Kelly picked up the lotion and squeezed it liberally over her breasts. "I guess I'm discovering that I was in love with my image of you, but I'm beginning to love you."

Hannah's eyes closed as Kelly's hands took her breasts and began to squeeze and roll them energetically. "Why are you telling me all of this now?"

"You asked."

Hannah sighed with growing pleasure as her nipples were repeatedly massaged between Kelly's vigorous fingers.

"Besides," Kelly said as if in afterthought, "I don't have anything to lose."

"Why not?" she managed.

"It wasn't that long ago that you didn't even know I was alive. These last weeks, but most especially today, are more than I ever expected to have and no matter what you decide about the future, I'll have this memory. No one can ever take it away from me or cheapen it. After seventeen years of wanting I made love to you and you were as fiery and passionate as I ever could have hoped. I've made you laugh and had the opportunity to tell you how I feel about you. I am the luckiest woman alive."

Feeling a bliss as deep and intense as grief, Hannah couldn't stop tears from slipping from her eyes. Kelly's hands quickly worked the sun block into her shoulders and up her throat to cover her face. Hannah raised her arms to hold her as she lay upon her and began kissing her. She pulled Kelly down to feel the full weight of this new lover overpowering her.

"I want to put my mouth on you," Kelly whispered into her mouth. "Will you let me do that?"

"Is this another thing you've dreamed of?"

Kelly simply nodded.

Hannah stroked her fingers lightly over Kelly's features. "Promise me one thing?" She waited for Kelly to nod before naming her condition. "Take your time."

Kelly was excruciatingly thorough and Hannah alternately laughed, cried and pleaded for quite

some time before Kelly finally allowed her ecstasy.

~***~

Hannah woke up thirsty. She opened her eyes to find that Kelly had moved her into the shade. It took her a moment to locate Kelly, midstream, swimming against the current. She appeared to be making headway and Hannah couldn't help but marvel at the strength and stamina it would take to accomplish such a thing. Opening the cooler, she fished out a bottle of water and drained it with a sigh of satisfaction.

Curious, she began pulling food from the chest. She found a wide variety of cut up vegetables and ranch dip, several kinds of fruit cut into bite size pieces, mom's fried chicken, hard boiled eggs, cheese cubes and chocolate pudding cups. Realizing that she already felt high, she ignored the beer. Hoping that Kelly was as hungry as she was, she laid everything out.

She looked up to find Kelly and saw her crouched at the water's edge watching her. Love and contentment poured out of Kelly's eyes and, even though it still made her feel a little uncomfortable, she couldn't help but smile. "Are you hungry?"

Kelly stood in a smooth, powerful motion and walked towards her.

"You look like a goddess rising from the sea," Hannah blurted out.

"And you are a fire sprite come to keep me warm," Kelly said with a wide smile. "You didn't sleep very long. How do you feel?"

"Fantastic."

Kelly dropped down to lay propped on her elbow. "I'm worried that I scared you earlier. You know, what I said about loving you?"

Hannah picked up a bite of watermelon. "I'm not sure what to do about it," she admitted before popping it in her mouth.

"You don't have to do, or feel, anything about it." Kelly reached out and rubbed her leg. "Today exists on its own. It's not connected to anything in the future unless you want it to be. I won't attach any expectations or demands on anything that happens here today. This time...this place...is complete in and of itself."

"Don't you want more?"

"Of course, but it's not enough for me to want more. You have to want it, too, or it means nothing to me. I'm not trying to trivialize what's happening with us today; I just want you to know that I'm not going to rent a U-Haul based on one perfect day. We're still getting to know each other."

Hannah studied Kelly's eyes and could find no guile or coercion in them, only concern. Feeling free to do whatever she felt, Hannah leaned over and gave her a kiss of thanks. "Do you want something to drink?"

Kelly took a beer and they both fell to eating: feeding each other more often than not. Hannah could not remember ever feeling so safe or free in the presence of another person. Their laughter echoed gently in the cocoon that surrounded them. When they were full, they began putting food back into the cooler. Hannah kept a pudding cup out but couldn't find a spoon.

"Do you have something to eat this with?"

Kelly searched through her things. "I thought I had remembered everything, but it looks like I forgot spoons."

Hannah pushed Kelly back and leaned on her elbow next to her. "I don't need a spoon," she said as she peeled the top off. Dipping a finger into the chocolate she spread it over one of Kelly's nipples and leaned over to slowly lick it off. Kelly laughed at first and then became quiet. With unhurried casualness, Hannah attended to the other breast as well. Kelly reached for the pudding and Hannah stopped her. "I want to make love to you, Kelly. You had your turn, now it's mine."

"You don't have to," Kelly said.

"I know," Hannah said firmly.

Kelly briefly stroked her cheek, then laced her fingers behind her head and stretched languorously. Hannah decorated the places that she wanted to kiss with the smooth chocolate and set the last bit of pudding to the side. Rising to her hands and knees she began to slowly and randomly clean Kelly's body. In no time Kelly was panting and writhing under her tongue. Hannah thrilled to see the responsiveness of the powerful woman beneath her. It occurred to her that by Kelly's own admission no one had done this for her in years. That Kelly was so willing to be pliant and vulnerable for her was the most effective aphrodisiac of all.

When all traces of chocolate were gone, Hannah spread Kelly's legs and lay between them. Kelly whimpered as she rubbed her lips over the impossibly thick hair. Hannah could smell her essence and was almost overcome by the sweetness of it. Time held no meaning as she closed her eyes and softly learned Kelly's most secret place with her mouth. A taste like no other she had ever experienced flooded her senses and Hannah concentrated on making Kelly's body produce more and more of it. All too soon she was struggling to stay connected as Kelly bucked. Hannah tightened her arms on Kelly's convulsing thighs and held her mouth perfectly still. She ignored Kelly's hands in her hair and waited. Minutes passed and Hannah relaxed her grip only to delicately begin again. Kelly weakly protested at first then began to respond.

Using what she had learned of Kelly's needs the first time around, Hannah held Kelly on the tip of her tongue until she was frantically begging for release. The smallest change in pressure had Kelly crying out her rapture. Hannah wiped her face on Kelly's inner thigh and crawled up to take her into her arms.

To her dismay, Kelly buried her face between her breasts and burst into tears. Unsure what else to do, Hannah wrapped herself tightly around the sobbing woman and rocked her until she quieted.

"I'm sorry," Kelly mumbled into her chest.

"What happened? Did I hurt you?"

"No!" Kelly lay back and wiped at her tears stained cheeks. "I don't think I can explain it. I just..." she chuckled at herself. "I don't know what I expected. The feelings were so intense. Coming wasn't enough to let all of the emotion out. Does that make any sense?"

"Sort of." Hannah smiled down at Kelly and wiped the remaining tear tracks away. Kissing her eyes softly, Hannah whispered, "You're not as butch as you appear."

Kelly barked a laugh. "Don't tell anyone, okay? I have a reputation to protect."

"Your secret is safe with me," Hannah laughed back. "But I have to say that I won't ever see you as only butch again."

"How will you see me?"

"Like this," Hannah said as laughter fled. "Soft and vulnerable after screaming my name. Crying because coming wasn't enough. Standing on a cliff face like the queen of creation."

Kelly blushed and hid her face with a grimace. Hannah grinned at her discomfort and patted her stomach. "You're sticky. You should rinse off."

"You're coming with me," Kelly warned.

Hannah quickly rolled away, but Kelly caught her easily and ignored her squeals. She found that she did, indeed, warm up quickly and the water introduced them both to additional sensations.

~***~

Hannah sighed as she pulled the Blazer's door closed. "I don't want this to end."

"Me neither," Kelly said solemnly. "But it didn't happen here," she waved out the window then leaned over to touch Hannah's heart. "It happened here and we'll carry it with us forever."

Hannah brought the work-roughened hand to her lips. "Thank you, Kelly. It was wonderful; all of it."

Kelly smiled and set about taking them home. Hannah found herself repeatedly reaching out to place a hand on Kelly's arm as she shifted gears. She had forgotten how powerful a thing new

passion was. Even though she felt sated, the desire to be close was consuming.

When they reached the main road, Kelly took her hand and held it in silence. Hannah lay her head back on the seat and watched Kelly drive.

"What are you thinking?" Kelly finally asked.

"Just feeling," Hannah replied.

Kelly glanced over at her. "Feeling what?"

"Conflicting things mostly. Like being completely satisfied and wanting more. The contentment of having experienced a day like today and the melancholy of knowing it's almost over."

"It doesn't have to be over," Kelly said. "I'm kind of hoping its not, to tell the truth."

Hannah felt a tightness in her chest dissipate. "What did you have in mind?"

"Come home with me?" Kelly asked hopefully.

Chapter Nine

Hannah's first impression of Kelly's apartment was cluttered order. The walls were almost completely covered with pictures in every imaginable kind of frame, but the room itself was perfectly clean and neat. Hannah was drawn immediately to the pictures and Kelly was more than happy to explain who people were and what was happening. Of special interest to Hannah was a wall by the kitchen that held photos of Kelly during her Army days.

"You were so young," she said in wonder.

"I was," Kelly conceded. "Fresh out of high school and dumb as dirt."

Hannah chuckled at Kelly's tone. "Did you like the Army?"

"Some of it. I have some really great memories and I learned a lot."

Hannah tried to decipher the look on Kelly's face. "And the parts you didn't like?"

"Come on, I want to show you something." Kelly led her to a door in the hallway and stopped with her hand on the knob. "Remember we talked about my court case with Jay? And I was too

embarrassed to tell you what it was all about? Well, this is my hobby."

The door swung open and Hannah sucked in a breath at the dollhouse in progress on a low table. "Wow," she exhaled. "You made this?"

"This one is for my niece, Brittany. I make one for each kid as they turn 6. They tell me what they want it to look like and I give it to them on their birthday. This one is the fourth."

Hannah couldn't believe the detail that had gone into the miniature Victorian before her. Turrets and staircases and molding were intricately done. "This is amazing!"

Kelly reached out and grabbed one wall, shaking the whole thing roughly. "You can touch it. I have to make it rather sturdy so it will stand up to the kids. I still get called on for minor repairs, but they're pretty tough."

"I've never seen anything like this. It's beautiful and the detail is just incredible."

"Thanks. This one is almost done. Mostly just interior work is left. Her birthday is in about five weeks. I'm already starting the next one."

"What's it going to be like?"

"Actually it's going to be for my nephew and he wants something a little different."

Hannah heard papers rustling and reluctantly tore her eyes away to join Kelly at a table. The blueprints didn't resemble anything else in the room. "What am I looking at?"

"Brendan wants a police station complete with jail cells. I've never made one before so I'm struggling with the design phase. I've got 14 months till his birthday, but in a way it's going to be harder than the dollhouses. My experience with police stations is primarily from television."

"I would imagine that his is, too. Why were you embarrassed to tell me about this? You're an artist!" Hannah turned back to the Victorian. "Look at this! I've never paid much attention to dollhouses: the days when I would have loved to have something like this were long ago and far away, but even I can tell that this is a work of art."

"Making dollhouses is not very butch."

Hannah was genuinely surprised. "Is your image that important to you?"

"Not being laughed at like I'm a freak is important to me."

Kelly's pain tore at Hannah's heart. "You're not a freak."

"I don't care if people know that I'm a lesbian," Kelly said roughly. "What they think and feel about how I dress and what I do for a living is irrelevant. But when they find out about this they

use it like a weapon to make me feel like I'm playing at being a woman. I do this out of love and they use it to make me feel like a mutant. I expect derision and contempt over my sexuality. Part of coming out is figuring out how not to care about that. But I have no defense when it comes to this."

Hannah took another long look at Kelly's art. "Only a freak would use this as a weapon. It's extraordinary and it just proves that the woman I spent the day with is as unique and complex as I thought."

Kelly's sigh of relief was completely overdone and Hannah laughed with her.

"I have something for you that you should get a kick out of," Kelly grinned.

"A present?"

"A memento." Kelly left the room and Hannah followed her down the hall and into her bedroom. Blues and greens dominated and, in contrast to the living room, the walls were almost bare. A four poster king-size bed took most of the floor space and while Kelly's back was turned, Hannah surreptitiously leaned on it to test the firmness.

"Go ahead," Kelly encouraged.

Hannah saw Kelly's reflection watching her in a mirror and she laughed at herself as she crawled onto the bed. Kelly dropped onto the bed next to her and held out a framed photograph. Hannah giggled at the signed picture of the Superlatives with Kelly in the center and a string of safety pins hanging from one corner.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it!" Hannah laughed. "Nana has to see this. I know she didn't understand what I was talking about and this will make her hoot."

"It was kind of fun. Not the dress part so much as the choreography and the feeling of being part of a huge joke." Kelly replayed some of the arm motions from that night and sent them both into another bout of giggles.

"Do you have any other hidden talents I should know about?"

"Hmm," Kelly mused. "Aside from playing pool, imitating a drag queen and making dollhouses? I'm sure a few things will pop up down the road, but I think that about covers the main attractions. "

Hannah slipped a hand onto Kelly's thigh and slowly rubbed it through the tight denim. "There are some things I want to ask you about when you're up for it."

"Like what?"

"Well, you drop hints about things and then back off, but I don't want to pressure you about them, so let's start with why I've never seen you smoke."

"It's a nasty, expensive habit and I don't want you to think of me as a smoker. I'm down to three a day and by this time next month I hope to be an ex-smoker."

"How many have you had today?"

"None."

"Do you need one now?"

Kelly rolled over her and lay her head on Hannah's shoulder. "Not if it means leaving your side."

Hannah enfolded her in her arms and rubbed her face over the spiky blond hair. "I won't mind if you have one."

"I don't want it to be okay with you. I've made all sorts of rules about when and where I can smoke and if I have one now it will just be easier to break other rules. I don't need one right now. What else do you want to know about?"

Hannah weighed her questions. "Well, tell me about your dog. What happened to her?"

Kelly sighed. "Reba was a lab/husky mix. I found her in New Mexico on the side of the road after someone else hit her with a car and I took her to a vet. She was just so damn happy to see me and I fell in love with her. I paid to have her fixed up and then she died of cancer last year. I ended up having her put down because I couldn't bear to see her suffer anymore and it about killed me." Kelly rolled away to pick up a picture off the nightstand and handed it to her.

Kelly was on one knee with her arm around a pure black dog with a great many husky features.

"She was the best friend I ever had."

"That's how I feel about Cricket," Hannah empathized. "I'm sorry she died. I would have liked to have met her."

"I thought about bringing her to you for grooming, but you were with Brenda and it seemed too much like engineering a meeting with you."

"Would that have been such a bad thing?"

"Not necessarily, but I've always been concerned about letting my feelings for you become obsessive. That was one of several reasons I went into the military. I felt that I should get away from the temptation of pursuing you and become someone first. I was afraid of letting myself become defined by my feelings for you."

Hannah turned this information over in her mind. "You really have had a thing for me all this time, haven't you?"

"I don't think I ever really believed that anything would come of it. But this is so much different from what I imagined that it's not the same thing at all. The differences in who you really are make it feel like a new thing."

"It makes me feel kind of good," Hannah admitted. "Knowing that all these years there was someone out there who loved me and I didn't even know it. It makes me wish I had known."

"I needed to go out into the world before this had a chance of happening."

Hannah kissed Kelly's forehead. "Why else did you go into the Army?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"No."

"I have problems with authority."

Hannah giggled. "And the military was a solution?"

"It seemed like it at the time. My parents wanted me to go to college and they used the military as a threat thinking that I would take what they saw as the easy way out. I was feeling pretty rebellious at the time and I knew that they wouldn't approve. Plus, I'd just finished school and I couldn't see taking the same classes over again. It seemed too much like jumping through hoops to me." Kelly snuggled closer before going on. "Also, I wanted to find out what I could do. The idea of being pushed to my physical limits was appealing to me."

"So, why did you deflect me earlier about the things you didn't like about the Army?"

Kelly remained still for a long time. "Are you sure you want to talk about this?"

"You obviously don't," Hannah said gently. "Maybe if you tell me why you don't want to talk about it?"

Kelly was quiet for another long moment. "When you talked about your mom and your childhood, were you worried about how I would react?"

"A little. I didn't want you to get upset and angry over it because it was ancient history. It was a relief when you didn't."

"I was furious. I didn't have to work that Saturday morning. I went out to the range and shot things until I felt better."

Hannah felt a mix of guilt that Kelly had been upset by it and a rush of warmth that she had been so affected. "Are you worried that I'll feel something like that?"

Kelly nodded.

"Then let's get it over with." Kelly buried her face in her breasts and Hannah turned to hold her tighter. She slipped her leg over Kelly's hip and hugged her with everything she had. "Just tell me, Kelly. You're scaring me."

Kelly spoke into her neck in broken words. "I was in trouble for fooling around in the shop and my CO made me stand guard over a fence post on the base perimeter with a mock rifle. I fell asleep and a couple of drunk, off duty MP's found me and decided to teach me a lesson. They raped me."

Hannah was unable to hold in a strangled "No!" She felt as if her world had dropped out from beneath her.

"I fought them as hard as I could, but they don't teach you how to fight something like that. And the harder I fought the more they hurt me. They threw my clothes over the fence and left me there in the dark. I wanted to die."

"Oh, Kelly," Hannah sobbed quietly. "You poor thing."

"I couldn't get my clothes back so I walked back to the infirmary. I still don't know how I made it." Kelly seemed to be in the grip of relentless memory. "I was in bed for a week. They called my parents and told them it was a training accident and I only had minor injuries. I guess since I didn't need surgery it was minor to them, but it didn't feel minor and it wasn't a training accident. I'd never been with a man before. It was like being mauled by aliens. Imagine the most horrific creature possible and then imagine it wanting to mate with you. Even that doesn't describe the way it really was."

"What happened to them?"

"Nothing. I was encouraged to let it go in exchange for not being held accountable for deserting my post."

"What?" Hannah was enraged and horrified. She couldn't even begin to speak the outrage she felt.

"My father came to see that I was alright the day before I got out of the infirmary and he broke down and sobbed like a baby when he found out. I don't think he ever felt like I had failed him, but there was nothing he could do against an organization like the Army and it made him feel helpless. It was a long time before he understood why I needed to finish out my hitch, but he let me do it and on the day I was discharged he spat in my CO's face."

"Good for him!" Hannah inwardly cheered for him.

Kelly's voice brightened. "My mother was the one who accomplished the most. She was livid. She made me tell their names, and I still don't know how she did it, but she found their mothers and told them what their sons had done. I got written apologies from all three of them."

Hannah laughed through her tears. "Your parents sound great."

"They are. I've been really lucky in that department."

"Why did you finish your hitch?"

"God, that was so hard. It was almost a year and I hated every minute of it, but I had to beat them. They wanted me to accept an early discharge, but I needed to prove that I wasn't a quitter. It felt like they wanted me to admit that I was weak because I was a woman and it was expected that we couldn't take it like a man. As if a man in the military has to deal with anything as intolerable as being gang-raped. I spent years in group therapy and I still have trouble with it from time to time."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Kelly. I can't even imagine how horrible it was for you."

Kelly sighed. "I can't imagine what it was like finding out that your mother didn't love you."

Hannah leaned back to look into Kelly's face. "You can't equate the two. They're not the same at all."

"But they're both horrible. Does it matter if one is worse than the other? Bad is bad and it serves no purpose to compare them as if pain is a contest." Kelly wiped tears from both their cheeks. "So, do you need to shoot something?"

Hannah smiled weakly. "I've never shot a gun in my life."

"It's easier than swimming," Kelly said lightly. "Is there anything else you want to know about before I take a shower?"

"Just one thing. Is your house always this neat or did you clean up just for me?"

Kelly laughed and hugged her again. "I haven't cleaned in a week, but thanks for the compliment."

~***~

After they both showered they made love again and spent most of the night talking. Hannah hadn't bothered to even go home and change her clothes before heading over to Nana's home to give the Murdock's the morning off for sleeping in and going to church. She happily bounced her way tiredly through waking all the residents and making them breakfast, then spent the bulk of the morning in the garden with her grandmother telling her about her day with Kelly. After

making lunch and welcoming the Murdock's home, she hugged her grandmother and accepted her good wishes and took Cricket with her.

She felt entirely too happy and needed to talk so decided to pay an unexpected visit to Jay and Freddie. With a goofy grin on her face she knocked on the door. Freddie opened the door and after a brief look of shock he reached out and pulled her into the house.

"Where have you been?" he demanded. "We looked everywhere for you! Did you see her?"

"I spent most of the day with her and we talked all night," Hannah said with a hint of embarrassment. "It was incredible."

Freddie threw his hands up in disgust and flounced out to the back deck. "She's here," she heard him say. "She looks like she's in love."

Hannah reeled at the venom in his voice and couldn't hide the betrayal she felt when Jay stepped into the room. "I came here to share my happiness with you and this is what I get? I thought you would be glad for me!"

"I'm sorry, Hannah," Jay said as he put an arm over her shoulders. "It's just that happiness was not quite what we expected and you know how dramatic Freddie can be. Especially after what she did to you."

Hannah was completely baffled. "What are you talking about? What did she do to me?"

Jay froze in shock. "Wait a minute," he said slowly. "Where have you been?"

"With Kelly, of course."

Joy spread across his features and he hugged her hard against his chest. "Freddie! Get your ass in here!"

Freddie was in a full blown snit and stopped in the doorway with his arms crossed sulkily over his chest. "Don't expect me to approve," he said.

"She was with Kelly," Jay said pleasantly.

Understanding flashed across Freddie's face and he threw his arms up again. "Well, why didn't you say so? This is wonderful news!"

Hannah pushed herself away from them both, still hurt and angry. "What are you two talking about? I came here to tell you that I had the best day of my life."

Both men reached for her in concern. "She's back," Jay said gently.

"Who's back?" she asked, even though she was afraid she knew.

"Brenda. She came by here yesterday just before lunch looking for you."

Hannah backed up and sagged into a chair. "Oh, God. This can't be happening."

Freddie pulled a chair over and sat down in front of her. "Tell me about Kelly. What happened with you two?"

"I think I'm falling in love with her," she said absently. All of her new and exciting feelings were in danger of being overwhelmed with unresolved issues and Hannah reeled. "Where is she?"

"She said something about being at home," Jay said tentatively. "I understood that to mean that she's staying at your house."

Disbelief grabbed her by the hair and shook her. "She's in my house?" Anger propelled her to her feet and out the door.

Freddie grabbed her arm halfway down the walk and stopped her. "You have to be calm when you see her," he warned. "She was always good at twisting your emotions, pelliroya. Don't go there until you are ready."

"He's right," Jay added. "You can stay here for awhile if you want. We won't tell her where you are if she calls."

Reason made a comeback and Hannah took a calming breath. "You're right. Thanks for reminding me." She looked around and rested her eyes on Kelly's car. "I think I'll return Kelly's car and have her drive me home later. I need to tell her anyway."

Both men hugged her warmly and Freddie apologized for his behavior. Hannah let Cricket back into the car and drove across town to Kelly's apartment. She compulsively checked every car she saw to see if it was Brenda's and by the time she knocked on Kelly's door she felt as though she had been hunted all day.

Kelly greeted Cricket gladly before getting a good look at Hannah's face. "Good God! What's wrong?"

"Brenda's back."

All of the color leached out of Kelly's face and Hannah could see her heart breaking. "So you've seen her?"

"I came here first," Hannah said and saw a measure of hope reassert itself.

"I'm glad you did," Kelly said. "I was afraid of something like this. Maybe it's good that it happened now."

Hannah stepped inside and Kelly shut the door. "How can it be good? Apparently she's still got a house key and she's already made herself at home."

Cricket was busily sniffing his way around Kelly's apartment, checking out all the new smells. Hannah sat on the couch and when Kelly joined her she moved over to snuggle under her arm. "I know I have to go home and deal with this, but can I stay here for a bit and get my bearings?"

"Of course. You're always welcome here. Stay as long as you like."

Kelly's voice was careful and correct and it made Hannah feel apprehensive. "Are you okay?"

"Well, it wasn't the news I was hoping for today, I admit that. But maybe it's just as well."

Hannah felt like Kelly was withdrawing from her and it added fear into the mix. "What are you saying?"

Kelly turned to face her. "I'm not sure how to say this without rambling, so bear with me." She took a deep breath and continued. "Do you remember telling me that you had unresolved issues with Brenda?"

"I said it to myself not 20 minutes ago," Hannah said.

"Well, I want you to resolve them. What I care about most is that you are happy and if that means that you end up with Brenda and not me, then so be it."

"You think I'll be happier with Brenda?" Hannah couldn't believe her ears.

"I don't know. This is what I'm trying to say. You were with her for six years, right? That sounds like a successful relationship to me and maybe you'll be happiest if you can work it out with her. You and I had one really amazing day, but it may not be enough to base a relationship on. I know that I love you, but I don't think you know for sure how you feel about me. Especially since you aren't sure how you feel about Brenda."

Hannah got up off the couch and began pacing in frustration.

"I'm not telling you to be with Brenda," Kelly clarified. "And it isn't that I don't want you in my life. I just want you to be clear about what you want and now you have an opportunity to find out. I think you should take advantage of it."

"What do you want, Kelly? This isn't just about me."

"You know what I want, Hannah. I'm clear about how I feel about you and I don't know Brenda, so this is about you. Tell me: how do you feel about me? Do you love me?"

Hannah wanted to say that she was falling in love. The words fought to break free, but she just couldn't say them. "I'm sorry, Kelly. I just don't know."

"I know that you have feelings for me," Kelly said with tears in her eyes. "You aren't the kind of woman who could fake what we felt yesterday and last night. But I knew then, just as I know now, that you really don't know how you feel and I accept that. You aren't hurting my feelings because you can't say what I want to hear. If you ever do say it, I'll know it's the truth. Yes! I want you to love me, but I really do want you to be happy. That's what I've always wanted."

"Aren't you worried or scared that I'll choose Brenda over you?"

Kelly snorted and wiped tears from her face. "Terrified."

Hannah sat back down and took Kelly's hand in her own. "This may not be something I can do in just one day, you know."

Kelly cupped her face with a warm hand. "I expect not."

Hannah wanted nothing more in that moment than to stay in Kelly's arms forever. "Should I call a cab or will you drive me home?"

"What do you want?"

"I want you to drive me home."

~***~

Hannah watched Kelly until she turned the corner and was gone. Brenda's car was in its usual place and she resented the normalcy of it. Wishing she could just run away she called Cricket to her side and went to the front door. It opened as she reached it and Brenda was there.

"Hi, honey. I'm home," Brenda said with a bashful smile.

Hannah felt resentment wash over her. "That doesn't even begin to sound funny," she said as she walked inside. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to my senses and came home to see if we could work things out. I know you're hurt and angry, but..."

Hannah held up her hand and Brenda's words came to an abrupt halt. "You've been gone for almost six months. You have no idea how I feel. I'm not sure you ever did. I want to know why you are in my house."

Brenda looked down at her feet and shoved her hands in her pockets. "I didn't have anywhere else to stay. I came here and you were gone. Jay and Freddie didn't know where you were, but they probably wouldn't have told me even if they did. I drove by your grandmother's home, but your car wasn't there and I didn't think she would want to see me either. I used the spare key to get in when it started to get dark."

Hannah held her hand out and waited. It took a minute for Brenda to realize what she wanted, but she eventually fished the key out of her pocket and handed it over.

"How will I get in when you aren't here?"

Hannah seethed. "It hasn't yet been decided that you will stay."

"Look, I was a jerk. I admit that. The way I left was selfish and mean. You didn't deserve it and I'm so sorry that I did that to you."

Hannah felt herself getting sucked into Brenda's contrition. That so familiar face and the voice she spent six years loving were begging for understanding and all of the old customary habits and feelings slid back into place. Hannah closed her eyes and pictured Kelly watching her from the water's edge with love shining from her eyes. Clarity was like a breath of fresh air. She opened her eyes and listened as Brenda continued.

"I thought about you every day and I knew right away that I had made a huge mistake. We had something good for six years and I threw it away on a whim. It's like I was crazy or something. I don't know what I was thinking then, but I've done a lot of thinking since then and I'm hoping that we can at least talk and find out if it's possible for things to work out between us. Six years is a long time to just throw away because one of us made a mistake."

"A mistake?" Hannah's voice rose. "That's what we're going to call it? A mistake? You left me without any warning that you were unhappy to chase after someone you didn't even know and you call it a mistake? It looked to me like you knew exactly what you were doing. I just found out a couple of weeks ago that you gave notice at your job. That sounds like something you planned, not a mistake." Hannah started to leave the room and swung back. "You made love to me the night before you left. Why did you do that? Why would you make love to me and then pack and leave in twenty minutes flat? Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

Brenda looked genuinely ashamed and Hannah felt like an ogre but her anger was justified. "Where were you? Where did you go?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Springfield, Missouri," Brenda said reluctantly.

"What was her name?"

"Is that what you're upset about? You think I cheated on you?"

"What was her name?" Hannah repeated.

Brenda walked over to the couch and sat down. "Jenny Mason, but nothing ever happened between us."

Hannah didn't know whether to be relieved or not. "How much money do you have left?"

"That's not really your business," Brenda said.

"If you have any hope of staying here, you'll answer anything I ask you whether you think I have a right to know or not."

Brenda looked at her in disbelief, then reached into her pocket and sorted through some bills. "Eighty-six dollars, more or less."

Hannah walked over to a window and tried to gather her thoughts.

"Can we at least talk about us?" Brenda asked behind her. "Are you seeing someone else? Is that why you didn't come home last night?"

Hannah turned slowly in an effort to assert some control over her emotions. "Where I was is not something I want to talk about with you right now. Maybe not ever."

"You're right. It's none of my business." Brenda chewed on her thumbnail and Hannah knew it as a habit signaling when she was worried. "I'm going to go out tomorrow and look for a job. I would really appreciate a place to stay for a couple of weeks while I get back on my feet. I know I'm asking for a lot and I don't deserve any kindness from you, but I'm asking because once you loved me."

Hannah wanted to stay angry, but it was making her tired and it was no way to begin figuring out what she felt. "You broke my heart," she said softly.

Brenda looked up at her with sad eyes. "I know. I'm so sorry."

"I don't know if it's something that can be fixed."

"I'd like a chance to try if you think it's possible. Just tell me what you want."

Hannah thought of Kelly and shook her head. "I don't know what I want." Needing to be alone for a while and exhausted by all of the events and emotions of the past thirty-six hours, Hannah picked up Cricket and walked towards her room.

"Hannah?"

"You know where the bedding is," she said without turning. "You can sleep on the couch tonight and we'll talk tomorrow."

Chapter Ten

Hannah woke to the smell of coffee and toast. Reluctant to face Brenda so soon she took a shower and dressed for work before making herself go out to find her at the table with the local paper.

"Good morning," Brenda offered. "There's coffee and bagels and I'll be leaving in a few minutes. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." The familiarity of this morning scene was unsettling and comforting all at once.

"I don't mean to hit you with a lot this early in the morning, but is it okay for me to use your phone number on job applications?"

Hannah poured herself a cup of fresh coffee and sat down. She looked into Brenda's brown eyes and let herself remember all of the times they had spent together. "I have a few ground rules we need to discuss."

"Of course," Brenda said with relief.

"You can stay for one month and then we will talk about what comes next. Don't bring anyone here and keep your things picked up. I don't want my house looking like someone's 'crib'. You are welcome to whatever food you need until you get your first paycheck and then you buy your own." Hannah watched to see that Brenda understood each item. "No long distance calls and no Internet. If you need to use the computer for making a resume that's okay."

"Actually, I used it yesterday," Brenda said tentatively. "I only printed one. I'll get it copied today, but I didn't use it for anything else."

"That's fine. Also, while I'm working I expect you to be working at getting a job. I don't want you here during the day. Is this acceptable for you?"

"You're being very generous," Brenda said sincerely. "Thank you."

"Don't make any assumptions about us, okay?"

Brenda looked away with a nod and Hannah went to her shop to prepare for her day. As she unlocked the door and put out the Open sign she saw Brenda drive away. She was soon busy working and she hoped that she appeared to be acting normally, but she felt a crushing

despondency and every minute seemed like an hour.

Freddie came by shortly after eleven with a worried look on his face. "You look terrible," he said softly.

Hannah blinked away tears. "Don't make me cry, Freddie. I feel bad enough as it is."

He sat down on the edge of the chair and waited silently.

Hannah knew he was dying to know what was going on and she marveled at his restraint. "Promise you won't judge me or get mad and I'll fill you in."

"Deal."

"I'm giving her a place to stay for one month and she's sleeping on the couch while she looks for a job." She could see him chewing on the inside of his mouth to keep silent and it made her smile. The bell over the door tinkled and Freddie sat quietly while she returned one dog to her pleased owner and another owner brought his dog in to be groomed. When they were alone again, Freddie offered to bathe her next dog and she accepted. He had done this before and she appreciated the help.

"Are you going to tell me about Kelly?" he asked over his shoulder while rinsing.

Hannah sighed at the wave of longing that swept over her and hid a grin at the smile on his face. "Have you ever had a perfect day?"

"That good?"

"Better," she admitted shyly.

"So, what did you do?" he sing-songed.

"She took me up to a place in the mountains on the river. It was so beautiful, Freddie. It was like being on a deserted island. We didn't see anybody else all day."

Jay blew into the room and looked at both of them with concern. Hannah burst out laughing at his expression and her depression lifted enough to let some light in.

"What did I miss?" Jay demanded.

"I love you guys," she blurted out.

"We love you, too, pelliroya," Freddie said. "The wayward philanderer is sleeping on the couch for a month," he said in an aside to Jay. "She was just going to tell us all about her perfect day in a mountain paradise with the mechanic."

Jay sat down expectantly and crossed his legs.

"She told me about the dollhouses," she said to him. "Have you seen them?"

"Only in pictures," Jay said. "I was impressed."

"She's working on a Victorian right now and it's amazing. The detail on it is incredible. She has a real gift."

"Did you make love?" Freddie asked impatiently.

Hannah blushed so hard she thought she might faint and Freddie's laughter rang in her ears. "That is none of your business."

Freddie finished towel-drying the Shih Tzu and put him in a cage, then walked over to sit on the arm of Jay's chair. "So, what else did you do?"

Hannah shook her head with a laugh. "We talked. I know that isn't very exciting for you, but it was for me. She's not at all what I expected."

"You're not going to stop seeing her now that Brenda is back, are you?" Jay asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Hannah said and felt an ache start in her heart. "I barely know her, but I already feel like she's somehow necessary to me and it scares the hell out of me. I don't know if I can trust my feelings. After all, I thought everything was okay between Brenda and I."

"You did tell Kelly that Brenda was back, didn't you?"

"Of course." Hannah kissed and patted the pound puppy she had just finished, put him in the pen to wait and swept the floor as she recounted her conversation with Kelly. Both men looked thoughtful when she was finished and Hannah waited with quiet dread for them to speak.

"I'm just going to have to meet her," Freddie finally said. "She sounds like quite the woman."

"I hope you're not going to do anything behind my back," Hannah warned. "My life is complicated enough right now."

"Maybe if you invite her to dinner we could just happen to drop by," Freddie said hopefully.

"With Brenda here?" Jay said. "Maybe we could invite her to dinner at our place and Hannah could come over."

Hannah sighed. "Give me some time, fella's. I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed and I've got to get my head on straight."

~***~

Brenda was on her best behavior all week. She was attentive and unobtrusive, following every rule and being as helpful as she could manage without being annoying. Hannah found herself easing back into the rhythms they had established as a couple. Cricket, of course, was just happy to see his other mom and Hannah felt an irrational surge of betrayal every time he went to Brenda for attention.

Nights were the hardest. Getting to sleep was near impossible. She lay behind her locked bedroom door and replayed conversations both real and imagined with a variety of people. She worked out all of the things she could have said if she were just a little more clever, but no matter how adroit she became in her imagination she still felt dismal. She woke up from dreams of loss and betrayal more than once with Brenda outside her door asking if she was all right.

The weekend was especially difficult and when Hannah wasn't working on the yard, she went to her grandmother's home. The Murdock's were more than happy to go out on a date Saturday night while she stayed to make dinner and get everyone settled for the evening.

Her first appointment the following Monday morning cancelled by answering machine and she found herself with some alone time. After trying to talk herself out of it, she succumbed to temptation and called Kelly's house. On the third ring an answering machine picked up.

"I'm not home. Leave a message."

Just that little bit of Kelly's voice brought tears to her eyes and she almost hung up. "I just wanted to hear your voice," she finally said. Unable to think of anything else to say she slowly returned the handset to its cradle. Heartache stayed with her all day.

Brenda returned to the house in the early afternoon and came into the shop. "I'm only here for a minute," she explained. "I just wanted to tell you that I got a job at the check cashing place in the Park Street Mall. I start tomorrow."

"Congratulations," Hannah said, and meant it. The fact that Brenda really was making an effort gave her some relief.

"I don't want to get in your way," Brenda said with a proud grin. "I just thought you might like to know that I haven't been wasting my time."

"I didn't think you were," Hannah said, "but I must admit that I didn't expect you to have something so soon. I thought it was pretty tight for jobs out there."

"It is," Brenda said seriously. "But I really wanted one and I kept at it. I actually had two job offers today, but this one pays better and starts sooner. If you'll let me I'd like to cook dinner tonight to say thanks."

Hannah relented and it wasn't long before mouth-watering odors began to drift into the shop. When she was done for the day and the shop had been cleaned and prepped for the next day's

appointments, dinner was ready and waiting for her. With a towel placed over her arm Brenda played garcon, seated Hannah at the table and proceeded to list the special of the day and take her order. Brenda had played this game before and Hannah always got a kick out of it. Before she knew it they were reminiscing about the past and all of the good and funny times they had enjoyed together.

Hannah's laughter unexpectedly turned into tears over dessert. "I'm so sorry," Brenda whispered into her ear as she held her. "I'm a fool and I'm so sorry." Hannah relaxed into her arms and cried herself out. The feel of Brenda's body was like a comfortable pair of old shoes, but her heart was in turmoil.

"Can we talk about us?" Brenda asked when Hannah had control of herself once more. "I've been trying to respect your space since I've been back, but I think we need to talk about the past and the future."

"I know," Hannah admitted. "I've been trying to ignore it."

"I've been hoping things would just heal themselves, too."

Hannah stared into Brenda's face and it's familiarity. "Why did you leave?"

"I wasn't happy. In retrospect, I handled it all wrong and if I had it to do over I'd do it different."

"Was it something I did?"

"Yes and no." Brenda looked away with a sigh. "Did you think of me as your lifelong partner?"

"Of course."

"Well, I didn't feel like I was. I wanted to be, but it seemed to me that you always expected us to fail."

Hannah's mouth dropped open in surprise. "How can you say that?"

Brenda waved a hand to indicate the house. "This is your house. I repeatedly offered to pay rent, but you wouldn't let me. It made me feel that I wasn't a permanent part of your life and you wanted to make sure that I didn't have any claim to it in case I ever left."

The sick feeling in her belly told Hannah that there was truth in what Brenda was saying and she wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"I bought furniture because I wanted to feel like I had a part in making our life together."

Brenda *had* paid for most of the furniture in the house. "Why didn't you ever talk about all of this?"

"I did!" Brenda insisted. "I even offered to help you pay for your grandmother's room and board."

"She's my responsibility," Hannah objected.

"If we were really lifelong partners then she would have been my responsibility, too. That's what I could never make you understand. You were always willing to share equally on emotional and sexual levels, but there's more to a marriage than that. Burdens and responsibilities are part of the package, too. But you always wanted to take care of everything yourself. Sometimes I didn't even know there was a problem until you had taken care of it. It's like you were unwilling to let yourself be even a little dependent on me for anything. I tried to demonstrate my willingness to be there for you on all levels by buying furniture and running errands, but you could never see it."

Hannah had gotten so used to thinking of Brenda as the bad guy that she had been completely in the dark that she had been partly to blame as well. Their entire relationship took on a brand new flavor and Hannah could taste the bitterness of it in her mouth.

"I didn't leave you because I didn't love you anymore," Brenda continued. "I left because I didn't think I was necessary to you and I wanted to feel that. If not with you, then with someone else."

"I'm sorry, Bren. I didn't know you felt this way."

"If I'm honest with myself, I have to admit that I probably could have done a better job of trying to communicate." Brenda gave a nervous smile. "I mean, you seem to be hearing me now so I must have been doing something wrong. I apologize for that, and for leaving you the way I did. It turns out to be the biggest mistake of my life."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room and Hannah struggled to put this new information into perspective.

"I still love you," Brenda said. "If you think there's a chance for us I'll do anything you want. I could pay for a counselor. I could even move into my own apartment and we could start over. I know you don't have any reason to trust me, but we had six years together and I'm hoping that will count for something."

Hannah blinked away new tears. "I need time to think about all of this. A lot happened while you were gone and I don't know what I'm doing."

~***~

An uneasy truce took hold in the house. Hannah looked forward to work so that she could be alone to think. Brenda was once again mindful of her tenuous position and tried not to put any pressure on her, but Hannah felt that pressure nonetheless. She felt pressure where Kelly was concerned as well, but the difference was that Kelly wasn't hovering over her shoulder. She felt completely free to go to Kelly or stay away and knew that Kelly would accept her decision

gracefully. At times she felt this showed that Kelly didn't care enough, but at other times she felt that Kelly was showing her the ultimate in respect and trust.

On Thursday, with Cricket begging in her lap while she ate her lunch, the telephone rang. "Doggy Styles," she answered.

"Hi, Hannah. It's Jill."

Hannah almost choked. "Hello, Jill. How are you?"

"I'm good. I was hoping I could stop by and talk to you for a minute if you're not too busy."

Oh, God, I don't think I can take any more! "Sure. When is good for you?"

"I'm parked at the curb, actually."

Hannah set Cricket on the floor and set down her sandwich. "Well, come on in then."

Jill came in less than a minute later and gave Hannah a genuine smile. "It's good to see you again."

"You, too," Hannah said.

"Is now a good time to talk?"

"I was just having lunch. Now is the best time." Hannah braced herself internally.

"I came by for two reasons. First, to thank you for breaking it off between us. You were right."

Hannah couldn't believe what she was hearing. "That's not what I expected to hear."

Jill laughed. "Did you think I came here to cry and beg?"

"Without meaning to sound arrogant, it would have fit better with recent events."

"I'd be happy to beg for your friendship if you'll have it. I've had time to process how we were together and we never would have worked as lovers. I was new in town and I wanted to fit right in. I wanted it to be easy and you're such a sweet person that I found myself ignoring the signs. It's never easy to tell someone it's over and I just wanted to tell you that I appreciated your courage and honesty. If you like me at all, I would very much like to be friends."

Hannah couldn't believe her luck and she moved in to give Jill a hug. "This is the best news. I would love to have you for a friend."

"Deal," Jill said.

Hannah moved away. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I came for two reasons."

Jill's expression had become serious and Hannah felt her skin break out in a cold sweat. "What is it?"

Jill rubbed her hands together nervously. "I know you don't like rumors, but I heard this first hand. I couldn't just let it go without telling you about it." Jill cleared her throat. "I stopped by Safeway on my way home last night to buy groceries and I overheard your name. I got curious so I followed them."

Hannah watched incredulously as Jill's voice and mannerisms changed. *"That furniture is mine. I paid for it and I'll be damned if I let her keep it all. She has her precious house and I have nothing. I know where all the receipts are and my name is all over them, so I can just back the truck in and start loading. Even if she calls the cops, the receipts show that I have the right so there's nothing she can do to stop me. I just have to act like I still care till Saturday morning and then she won't be able to run my life anymore."*

Hannah buried her face in her hands and Jill's arm came across her shoulders. "That's not a direct quote," Jill said gently. "But that was the gist of it. I'm assuming that was your ex." Hannah nodded and Jill squeezed her reassuringly. "I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you all of this, but I would have felt terrible if I had kept quiet."

Hannah straightened and used a tissue to wipe her eyes clear. "I'm glad you did."

"I couldn't hear the woman she was with," Jill apologized, "or I'd give you a sketch of her, too."

"It doesn't matter who it was," Hannah decided. "This is between Brenda and I."

"Um," Jill started. "Can I ask you something else? I promised myself I wouldn't because it's none of my business, but I'm worried for you. The woman you had an awareness of is Kelly, isn't it? I saw you both coming out of an apartment early in the morning a while back."

Embarrassed at being found out like that, Hannah nodded.

"Is she a good person? Does she treat you right?"

"Yes," Hannah smiled. "She is a good person and she's very good to me."

"And the rumors?"

"Distortions of the truth," Hannah said confidently.

Jill leaned forward intently to lock eyes with her. "Do you love her?"

"I don't know."

Jill squinted at her. "Is it that you really don't know or that you're afraid to know?"

That Jill could cut to the heart of it so quickly made Hannah blush. Jill broke into a smile. "Well, congratulations seem to be in order. I've got to get back to work, but if I can be of any help, just call me. And when things are settled I expect an invitation to dinner so I can meet Kelly properly."

Hannah hugged her again before she left, then left a message with Jay's assistant that she had a non-life-threatening emergency. She let Cricket have the lunchmeat from her sandwich and tossed the rest just as clients began coming in the door again.

To keep her mind off of Brenda's machinations while she waited for Jay to call her back, she pulled up a mental picture of Kelly and was astonished at the feelings of peace and exhilaration that came over her. She felt better so fast it brought tears to her eyes. "I guess it's true," she told the Jack Russell she was giving a summer cut. "I do love her. What do you think of that?" She laughed as he set to wiggling in excitement at her improved mood.

~***~

Hannah was much calmer when Jay showed up without calling. "My assistant said you were crying when you called. What's wrong?" Hannah filled him in on Jill's visit and she could see his legal mode kick in. "Does she have the receipts?"

Hannah shook her head. "I don't know. Let's assume she does."

"Okay. If she has receipts then she has a right to the property. We can file for an injunction tomorrow to prevent her clearing it all out until it's heard in front of a judge. The fact is that she abandoned her property without an agreement when she left six months ago. At best, you'll get to keep everything. At worst, she'll get everything back and have to pay the going rate for storage for the last six months. Whatever, you do not have to let her back in the house. Not tonight; not ever."

Hannah mulled it over. "If it goes to court it'll be ugly."

"True," he said simply. "But it will be ugly on your terms, not hers. It's obviously her plan to surprise you with movers on Saturday morning. Thanks to Jill you've been spared that humiliation, but it's still going to be unpleasant. What you need to decide is what you want at the end of this. How important is the furniture to you?"

Hannah shrugged. "When I first heard, I thought the furniture was very important. If Jill hadn't come here today and Brenda had been able to carry out her plan, I would have been hysterical on Saturday morning because the furniture would have distracted me from the real issue. I've had time to think about it though. What I want is Brenda out of my life for good. And I don't want the back stabbing and bickering to continue for months. She can have the damn furniture if she'll just

go away."

Jay smiled and hugged her. "Good for you! Now, you'll need a release that says she can't come back later and say that you owe her for anything. It can also include a clause to discourage harassment. Does that sound okay?"

"Can you make it sound scary?"

"Is that what you want?"

Hannah waggled her eyebrows at him. "Impress me."

"Oh, you really ought not to have said that." Jay smoothed his hair back with both hands. "Do you have a plan for tonight? Are you going to confront her?"

"I hadn't thought about it," Hannah confessed. "I don't think I can pretend that nothing is going on for the next two days, but I don't want the inevitable fighting either."

Jay looked at his watch. "She can always find somewhere else to sleep, so I recommend-as your lawyer-that we tell her tonight. I'd like time to see the receipts, check them out and see how bad this is going to be for you. Freddie will kill me if he doesn't get to come and watch the fireworks, so how about we come back for dinner at 6:30."

~***~

Brenda came home a short time later and Hannah informed her that Jay and Freddie were coming to dinner. She then spent the interval doing a much needed deep cleaning on her shop. Brenda looked in a few times to see if she wanted help, but Hannah graciously told her no. The guys arrived promptly on time and Hannah waited for Freddie to turn into a drama queen, but he was scrupulously well mannered. He sat down and engaged Brenda in conversation about her job.

Hannah went to the kitchen with Jay and in no time they were setting a stroganoff on the table. She felt strangely numb and was virtually unable to join in the conversation. Fortunately, Freddie and Jay were masters at trivial chitchat and she contented herself with picking at her food.

"You're awfully quiet," Brenda finally said to her.

"I've had a strange day," she answered slowly. Her gut started churning and she looked to Jay for help. "I think I'm going to be sick." Freddie reached over and rubbed her back and she calmed somewhat.

Jay tossed his napkin on the table and pushed his plate to the side. "I kind of wanted to wait till dessert just for the effect, but now is fine, too. As Hannah's attorney," he said solemnly to Brenda, "I'd like a chance to go over the receipts you claim to have for the furniture and verify their authenticity. Hannah would prefer to do this in a friendly fashion and avoid the courts if at all possible."

Brenda's face took on a look of panic and disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

Jay sighed and looked at her like a parent listening to a child's lie. "We know that you plan to bring a truck on Saturday morning and take the furniture. There's no use denying it. Hannah is willing to let you take what you think is yours, but nothing leaves this house without a receipt. If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon work it out now."

"She has personal items here as well," Hannah added weakly. "Books, CD's, some clothes and other stuff."

"That's right!" Brenda quickly spoke.

"I'm sure Hannah will be more than fair about packing up your things for you." Jay said calmly.

"It's mostly done already," Hannah said. "There are boxes in the spare bedroom."

"So all we need now are the receipts," Jay said firmly.

"Who told you?" Vengeance was writ large on Brenda's features.

"I'm psychic," Freddie said ethereally. "It came to me in a dream."

Hannah couldn't help smiling at him. She hated conflict and Freddie's levity was just what she needed.

"The receipts?" Jay reminded again.

Brenda stared at them all, saving her worst glare for Hannah, then threw her chair back and stormed out of the house.

"Oh my," Freddie said in mock concern, "I think we've upset her."

Jay chuckled and took her hand. "Is there anything in particular that you would like to keep?"

Hannah worked to remember what Brenda had bought in the six years they had been together. "I'm not sure."

"Cough if something comes up."

Hannah nodded and they waited for Brenda's return. She carried a small manila envelope with her and emptied its contents onto the table. Hannah sat quietly with Freddie's arm around her as Jay checked each one and made notes. As it turned out, Brenda had a receipt for almost everything, including the bed, refrigerator and television. The table and chairs they sat at were her grandmother's and it looked like it would be the only place to sit left in the house. Fortunately, Brenda did not have receipts for anything in the shop so her livelihood was secure.

She coughed once for the refrigerator because they could be expensive and she would need one. Nothing else seemed as important.

When Jay was finished he turned to her. "Do you dispute any of this?"

"No."

"Some of these receipts don't have any names on them. Just because she has them doesn't mean the items are hers."

"I remember her buying them," she said as Brenda opened her mouth to protest. "It all sounds accurate to me."

Jay turned back to a surprised Brenda. "Okay. I don't see any problems here. Hannah isn't going to object to any of the items represented here being removed. Just out of curiosity though, would you be interested in selling the refrigerator?"

Hannah held Freddie's hand as Jay negotiated, aware that his foot was tapping furiously. It occurred to her that he was remarkably calm in a situation that would normally see him angrily cursing in Spanish. Hannah stood and began clearing the table and when Freddie joined her, she softly asked, "What did he promise you for behaving? I've never seen you this calm."

"A diamond earring. I think he was going to get it for me anyway, I've been begging for months, but this way he feels like he's the boss and I do so love it when he's bossy."

Hannah giggled quietly at Freddie's suggestiveness.

"I'm glad you're letting her take that hideous sofa," he whispered. "I've always hated it. Will you let me help you redecorate?"

"Sure."

Freddie's eyes sparkled with pleasure. "You need paint, girl. Get some color in your life. All this white is so...Republican. It's time for you to stretch out a little and experiment. By the way, what kind of décor does Kelly like?"

"Hush," she warned. "Let's just leave Kelly out of this until the last one is gone, okay? Besides, I haven't even seen her for almost two weeks. Maybe she's decided that I'm not worth the trouble."

"You love her," Freddie teased.

"I barely know her." Hannah enjoyed the teasing as much as she wanted it to stop.

"You love her," Freddie teased again. "I can see it in your eyes." Hannah opened her mouth to dismiss him and he put a finger over her lips. "You love her." She nodded helplessly as he enfolded her in his arms. "I'm so happy for you, *pelliroja*. But, you have to tell her as soon as

you can or it will only become more difficult."

"I know."

"Does she have furniture we can work with?"

Hannah backed away and slapped at his arm in exasperation. "I'm not going to ask her to live with me just because she has furniture."

"Hannah?" Jay called from the table. "How does \$275 sound for the refrigerator?"

The refrigerator was only 3 years old and it sounded like a good deal. "When do you want it?" she asked Brenda.

"Now would be good," Brenda shrugged.

"Will you take a check?"

Brenda snorted. "And give you time to cancel it? Forget it. I'll take cash."

Hannah went out to the shop and between the cash drawer and her purse she got the money together. When she put it on the table, Jay covered it with his hand and directed Brenda in signing over the appliance on the back of the sales receipt. When it was handled, he informed her that she would have to spend the night somewhere else and not return to the house until Saturday after 10 am.

"Where am I supposed to go?" Brenda demanded.

"Where were you going to go on Saturday?" Hannah asked nonchalantly. "Go to a motel. Sleep in your car. I don't really care."

"I can't believe you're going to go back on your word. You said I could stay here for a month."

Anger flashed to boiling point faster than Hannah would have believed possible. "*You* were the one who sat there a few days ago begging me to go to counseling with you and the whole time you were planning on a surprise attack! You didn't mean a word you said! You had me believing that everything was my fault just so you could pull off some little play in front of your friends! Let's not overlook the fact that you left me!"

Hannah could see that she was out of control. She watched herself with a strange sort of double sight as rage and pain poured out of her. The most infuriating aspect of it was that every word seemed to make Brenda harder and more convinced of her position as the underdog. She finally reached a point where she had run out of things to say and she struggled to control her inflamed emotions.

"Just get out," she ordered.

Brenda pocketed her money, picked up her receipts and stood to go. "At least I never cheated on you."

"What?" Hannah was incredulous. "When did I ever cheat on you?"

"Where were you the night I came back, huh?" Brenda smirked. "I saw your face when you came home. It was pretty obvious you had just crawled out of bed with some floozy."

Serenity settled around Hannah like a cloak and she wanted to laugh with the pleasure it brought along. "First of all, you left me for another woman. You were very clear about that at the time. Second, you'd been gone for six months and I thought you were never coming back. Third, you're probably the only person to ever call her a floozy. I didn't think anyone even used that word anymore." Jay was chuckling behind her back and she could hear Freddie whispering. "I've been an idiot to have stayed away from her this long. I knew I didn't want you back from the start. I let myself give you another chance and you were using that chance to deliberately hurt me one more time. If you wanted your things, all you had to do was ask. I gave you a chance because I thought you were sincere. As it turns out you are devious, deceitful and unscrupulous. I have not deserved any of this, so I have to assume you're doing it to impress someone. Well, go ahead and tell your little friends whatever makes you look good. They'll find out soon enough that you're untrustworthy and word will spread. It won't be long before women are warning each other about you and you'll have to start over someplace else. No matter what you say about me now, in the end everyone will know it wasn't true."

Hannah had followed Brenda all the way out to her car as she spoke and felt that she was in the grip of something bigger and more powerful than herself. Where the words were coming from was a mystery, but as Brenda started her car she leaned over to speak through the open window. "From now on, every bad or disappointing thing that happens to you in your life will be your own fault. You'll deserve it. It's called karma, honey."

With a final glare, Brenda sped off and Hannah drew in a deep, sweetly scented breath. Turning, she found Jay and Freddie behind her with huge smiles. Jay clapped slowly and Freddie dropped to his knees to kiss her feet. She laughed shyly at their approval.

"Get up, Freddie. You're embarrassing me."

"You're my hero," he gushed.

Chapter Eleven

Hannah woke with a sense of excitement on Friday morning and by the time she finished her first cup of coffee she realized she was looking forward to seeing Kelly. Once she understood the source, the anticipation was almost unbearable. She became more and more distracted as the morning wore on and she finally decided she needed to hear Kelly's voice. In a spare moment, she called Kelly's machine like an addict in search of a fix. To her delight there was a new message.

"Hello. You have reached the Kelly Lowell Fan Club Information Line. If you would like to hear a reading of Kelly's likes and dislikes as printed in the latest issue of Baby Dyke Magazine, press one. For a schedule of Kelly's upcoming appearances in your area, press two. If you would like to hear Kelly's inspirational Thought-for-the-Day, press three now. For a personalized expression of love and support, please call back after 5:20 this evening to speak with the Fan Club's icon or request a call back after the tone. If you just want to hear this message again, please hang up and call back as often as you like. Thank you."

Hannah felt her heart swell with love and she thought she might implode. She hung up before the tone and stood with her hand on the phone. It wasn't enough to hear her voice. She needed to see her. She couldn't reach her next appointment on the telephone, but she was able to reschedule the rest of her day as if it were meant to be.

A short time later she was closing up the shop, something she had not done in longer than she could remember, and changing her clothes. She thought about calling ahead, but didn't want to waste any more time.

Kelly's boss was in his office as she walked up to the counter and she waited for him to come out. "Is Kelly in today?"

"Yeah," he said curtly.

"May I see her?"

He reached over to a stack of papers and pulled out a work order.

"No," she said. "It's not about my car. It's personal."

"She gets off at five just like every other day."

Hannah stood there with her mouth open as he shuffled back into his office. When he totally ignored her, she went outside and looked around uncertainly. Glancing back into the office to make sure that Merle wasn't looking, Hannah slipped around the corner of the building and through the gate. All of the big rolling doors were up and Hannah peered into each one in search of Kelly. A good looking Latino man asked her if he could help and directed her further down the row when she explained what she wanted.

She found Kelly's legs sticking out from under a Lincoln and forced her racing heart to act casual. She walked over and crouched down next to the long legs. "How's it coming?"

"This bolt is a bitch," Kelly grunted. "I wish people would take better care of..."

Hannah smiled at the silence.

"Please, Lord," Kelly whispered soft and low, "don't let it be Cantina messing with me again. I can't take it."

Hannah wanted to cry at the loneliness she heard in Kelly's voice. She reached down and slid her hand over Kelly's leg. "Come out where I can kiss you, babe." When nothing happened, Hannah reached under the car and seized Kelly by the belt to drag her out. Ignoring the arms crossed over Kelly's face, she grabbed her by the shirt and pulled her up to a sitting position. "Look at me, Kelly. I was an idiot when I let myself be convinced to give Brenda a second chance. I don't know why I was so afraid-well, maybe I do, but that doesn't matter now. What matters is that...I love you." Kelly buried her face in Hannah's shoulder with a single sob and Hannah repeated herself, "I love you," until Kelly was laughing and they were kissing.

"I have the afternoon off," Hannah told her hopefully. "I really shouldn't be away from the house today, but I couldn't wait anymore. Will you come over after work?"

Kelly kissed her again, still careful not to touch her with her greasy hands. "I can be there in an hour. Maybe less."

Hannah looked around quickly to see that they were alone and whispered, "I want to make love to you," as her hand closed over a breast. "If you're hungry, you'd better eat before you come over."

Kelly's eyes were closed and she was breathing shallowly. Hannah kissed her once more and ran back the way she had come.

~***~

Temporarily replete, Hannah lay with Kelly curled in behind her and talked. She explained everything that had happened and how she felt, then asked what Kelly thought about it all.

"You smell good," Kelly sighed. "And I love your hair."

"My hair is like a brillo pad, and that's not what I asked you."

"It's a halo of fire." Kelly slid her hand down to cup gently between Hannah's legs. "A veritable burning bush."

Hannah's nerves began to sing again. "You are avoiding me."

"On the contrary," Kelly said as she nuzzled the back of her neck. "I don't have an opinion yet. When I do, I'll let you know. In the meantime..."

Hannah persisted. "What about tomorrow? She's coming back."

"Do you want me to be here?"

"Yes, but I'm worried that there will be a scene."

"She's going to find out about us sooner or later," Kelly said. "It might as well happen in private. You know that she's going to spread the word, don't you? How do you feel about everyone knowing about us?"

Hannah lifted one leg and hooked it over Kelly's hip with a groan as two long, agile fingers slid inside of her. "I don't care who knows."

"All of the rumors about me will include you now," Kelly said as she rose up on an elbow. "You'll be my femme or they'll call you my bitch and we'll be having aberrant, politically incorrect sex. They'll think that the name of your shop means something more than it does. They'll say that I lied to you about my past and they'll feel sorry for you. Some will feel it necessary to clue you in before it's too late."

"Okay," Hannah breathed.

"You say that now, but it's hard when people avoid you because they think you're different or depraved. People will say things to your face that will take your breath away. How are you going to handle that?"

It was hard to think with Kelly's fingers stirring her insides like that. "I love you. I don't care what they believe." Hannah licked her dry lips. "That feels so good, just like that. Don't stop."

"There will be a lot of speculation about our sex life. They'll probably say that we're into S & M and bondage."

Hannah brushed her hand over Kelly's mouth to stop her from talking as a steady, deep-seated pleasure coursed through her. "I don't care. Let them have their fun. We'll know the truth." Hannah had to stop for a breath between each sentence.

"You're so beautiful," Kelly said intently. "I can see how you feel and you're simply exquisite. You could stop now if you had to, but you're so close to needing it. I can make that happen," she offered. "I can hold you here for as long as you like or I can put you over the edge. Tell me what you want."

Hannah's entire being prepared itself for surrender. "Can you hold me...on the edge?" In moments she wasn't able to tell if it was Kelly's touch or her voice persistently crooning of love in her ear that made the feelings magnify so powerfully. She knew, in the far reaches of her mind that she was ultimately in control and Kelly would do whatever she asked, but she felt like a Stradivarius in the hands of a master. The more she relinquished volition, the sweeter the music played upon her body. When she heard Kelly's words, "Come for me, little one," it was the

easiest thing in the world to comply.

"It must be you," Kelly said in wonder. "I know I've never been this good before."

"I find that hard to believe," Hannah said into her shoulder. "It's like you know what I need before I'm aware of it."

"You make it easy to know. The smallest thing makes you respond."

Hannah arched her back involuntarily as Kelly demonstrated. "Wait," she gasped. "Let me catch my breath first." Kelly obediently stopped and Hannah slid her own hand down to hold her there. "How long do you intend keep your hand here?"

"As long as you'll let me."

The phone by the bed rang and Hannah stretched out with her free hand to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hey, *pelliroja*. Are you okay?"

"Sure, Freddie. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Your shop, it has been closed all day and not ten minutes ago I bruised my knuckles on your front door, but you didn't answer."

"You were knocking?" She looked up at Kelly's smiling face and knew it was true. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. I was...busy." Hannah slowly lifted her hips against Kelly's hand and was rewarded with a deep stroking.

"You are not sick?"

"I'm fabulous," she said carefully as Kelly's lips came to her breast.

"You are not sounding so good to me," Freddie said. "I will come to see for myself."

"No!" Hannah protested to the dial tone. "Crap! Get dressed, Kelly. Freddie's on his way."

Kelly rolled away and began to collect their clothes from the floor. "How long does it take for him to get here?"

"Five minutes, when he's on a mission."

They were barely dressed and still laughing at each other's frantic efforts to sort out their clothing when he arrived. With Cricket jumping at her legs, Hannah opened the door as Kelly flung herself onto the couch. "Hi, Freddie."

"You do not look sick," he said as he breezed into the room and froze with his eyes on Kelly. For

one long heartbeat he was still, then he flung his hands up. "But, of course! Why did you not tell me you were making love?"

"When did I have the chance?" Hannah laughed and Kelly buried her face in a cushion. Freddie dropped down next to Kelly. "So, introduce me to your *Tu nuevo amor*."

Hannah pulled Kelly up and sat possessively in her lap. "Kelly, this is one of my dearest friends, Freddie Azevedo. Freddie, this is Kelly Lowell."

"I love your hair," he enthused. "Who does it?"

~***~

By the time Jay showed up an hour later with pizza, Freddie and Kelly were like old friends. Jay acted like seeing Kelly there was the most natural thing in the world, but once in the kitchen he hugged Hannah clean off the floor. "I'm so happy for you, Hannah."

"Thanks, Jay. I'm happy for me, too."

After a simply delightful meal, they started emptying out drawers and clearing bookshelves in preparation for the next day's activities. Hannah's own disquiet at the magnitude of change that was about to occur took a backseat when she found Kelly with her head bowed at a bookcase. "What's wrong, babe?"

"Is she taking everything?"

Hannah looked around. "No. The table and chairs belong to my grandmother and I bought the refrigerator from her yesterday for a song. The nightstands in the bedroom are mine and so is the stereo. Then there's the books and knick-knack stuff. And, of course, the house is mine."

"She's cleaning you out," Kelly protested.

"It's her stuff," Hannah said lightly. "Besides, when it's all gone I'll really be free of her. Freddie's already offered to help me redecorate. At first I was scared, but now I'm kind of excited about it."

Jay poked his head around the corner. "What's up?"

Hannah put her arms around Kelly before answering. "She's just a little upset at how thorough Brenda's animosity is."

"She should have been here yesterday when you invoked karma on her. I know I felt better after seeing that."

"Invoking karma?" Kelly asked.

"It's kind of like a curse," Jay explained, "but without a backlash. It was very impressive."

"It just sort of happened," Hannah said with embarrassment. "She really shouldn't have called Kelly a floozy."

Kelly threw her head back and laughed. "Floozy? I'm pretty sure no one's ever called me that before."

"She didn't know who you were," Hannah smiled. Kelly's hands were rubbing her back and she didn't know if she would be able to let go.

Jay seemed to understand her dilemma. "I'm going to grab Freddie and we'll be back here in the morning about 9:30. Brenda should be here sometime after 10."

Hannah stayed right where she was as the men said goodnight and locked the door behind themselves. As soon as they were alone, Kelly picked her up in strong arms and silently carried her into the bedroom.

~***~

Hannah woke up in the dark and could hear Kelly breathing next to her. Moving carefully, she slid out of bed and padded into the kitchen for a drink. Cricket came to see what she was doing and Hannah scooped him up for some loves. She felt a little anxious about the coming day and she sat in the dark allowing herself the luxury of feeling without thinking about it. She didn't try to work anything out or understand herself; she just stared out the back door at the moonlit yard and let her emotions simmer. The mix of joy, relief, uncertainty, heartache and fulfillment made for a poignant blend and Hannah let the sweet ache of it reign for a time.

Eventually, her thoughts turned to the woman who slept in her bed. It was tempting to go in and wake her for more lovemaking, but she resisted the urge, opting instead to think of their future. There was no particular reason to believe that a relationship with Kelly would be more successful than the one she had shared with Brenda, especially since her judgment was currently impaired by passion, but there was a feeling about it that she couldn't explain.

Maybe it was the knowledge that Kelly had loved her and no other for most of her life. Hannah found it incredibly romantic to be loved so completely. She worried that she would fail to live up to Kelly's expectations, but that was to be anticipated in every relationship. Kelly probably worried the same thing about her. With a little frown, Hannah wondered what their first fight would be about and how they would treat each other. She hoped Kelly wasn't the type to say hurtful things only to apologize later, saying that she didn't mean them. She had known several people who fought dirty, including Brenda, and had never been able to believe that they did not mean every word they said. She herself was careful not to do the same as it hurt like the dickens when it was done to you.

Kelly's eating habits would take some getting used to as well. Hannah had watched her

unobtrusively pick meat off the pizza Jay had brought earlier in the evening. She had shaken off the largest pieces as she picked up each slice and fed the rest to Cricket on the sly. She didn't have a problem with Cricket getting treats, but she wondered how much her own eating style would have to change. The idea of eating a steak or a hamburger in front of Kelly made her feel strangely ill at ease now. She knew that Kelly didn't want her to feel that way, but it wasn't something she had a handle on yet. She imagined it was probably how Kelly felt about smoking in front of her.

Hannah was very impressed with Kelly's determination to quit smoking. She made a point of not bringing it up since Kelly had explained that she didn't want Hannah to think of her as a smoker. Kelly had her own reasons for quitting that had nothing to do with her, but she still felt that Kelly was doing it for her. Consideration of her eating preferences seemed a small thing in comparison.

Feeling a little cold, Hannah poured herself the last cup of yesterday's coffee and put it in the microwave. While it was heating, she sneaked into the bedroom for her slippers. Moonlight angled across the bed and illuminated Kelly's back with quiet blue radiance. After a long and pleasurable look, Hannah carefully arranged the covers over her and pulled the door almost closed.

On her way back to the kitchen she picked up a shoebox full of photos from her life with Brenda and placed it on the dining table. With a small desk lamp and her coffee, Hannah went through the pictures with a mind to what she wanted to keep and what she was willing to let Brenda have.

Sorting through the pictures was a little like judging the contents of the ocean by the debris that washes up on the beach. A snapshot of Brenda with her broken foot up on a cushion seemed self-explanatory, but described none of the frustration she had suffered at not being able to finish out the year on the softball team. And the picture of Hannah dressed as a Teletubbie for Halloween disguised how incredibly angry she had been at Brenda for spending an hour on the phone with a psychic. Not to mention the picture at the park where they both looked bored almost to death, but was, in fact, taken less than twenty minutes after having made love in the back of a friend's pick-up truck in broad daylight.

Hannah stopped to get a napkin to dry her tears and started a fresh pot of coffee while she was up. Some of the pictures made her smile and some made her angry. Cricket's baby pictures were in the box and she set those aside for herself along with a number of shots of Jay and Freddie. Polaroid's she had thought destroyed long ago from a weekend in a Bed and Breakfast upstate she quickly cut into tiny pieces and threw away. She prayed that Brenda didn't have a stash hidden somewhere.

Christmas mornings, birthday parties, rainy days, cultural events, portraits, charity benefits and surprise shots—all found a place in one pile or another. Hannah put Brenda's pictures back in the shoebox and placed it with the rest of her things. The pictures she wanted to keep she put in a large envelope and placed with her books. Everything else went into the trash. Feeling as though she had finished grieving for what was good in her relationship with Brenda, Hannah poured herself another cup of coffee and went into the bedroom. Kelly had scarcely moved and Hannah sat down in the reading chair to watch her sleep. The covers had slid just far enough to let her see

one shoulder and she used her mind's eye to draw in the rest.

She wondered where Kelly would be sleeping next. Hannah would only be able to offer sleeping bags on the floor and as cozy as that could be, she didn't expect to be taken up on it. Kelly's king-size bed came to mind and she pondered the odds that she would be invited to share it.

This started speculation as to how long she should wait after Brenda was gone to ask Kelly to move in. She had a vague notion that if Brenda had died she should wait a year, but Brenda wasn't dead and she had been gone six months already. Did that mean she should wait a few months because Brenda had come back for a spell? How long did decorum dictate before she could get on with her life?

Finances were not a problem as long as no more big expenses came up for a while. She would have to take her time getting replacement furniture and Freddie's dreams of interior decorating would have to be carefully managed, but money was not a big concern. She spent quite some time trying to figure out how and when to ask Kelly to live with her without seeming callous or acquisitive and came up with no answer.

Kelly shifted sleepily to her side, mumbled indecipherably and settled back to sleep. Cricket jumped onto the bed and curled up at her back with a sigh. Hannah held her breath to hold in a joyous giggle. It was silly to be so affected by such small things, but it was beyond her control.

In spite of the coffee she had been drinking, Hannah began to yawn. Dawn was not far off if the color of the night sky was to be believed. She padded out to turn off the coffee pot and returned to find Kelly sitting up in bed.

"Go back to sleep, babe."

Kelly rubbed her eyes with one hand and reached for her with the other. "You're up early."

"I've been up," she corrected as she tossed her robe on the chair. "I'm coming back to bed now."

Kelly pulled her into the circle of her arms, still warm from sleeping, and gathered the covers up. "You're cold."

"And you are toasty warm." Kelly's breathing evened out quickly and Hannah let the rhythm of it draw her down.

~***~

Kelly woke her up at nine with coffee and kisses. "The guys will be here soon," she prompted. "I didn't know if you wanted a shower or not."

When Hannah came out of the bathroom later, Jay was scrambling eggs while Kelly demonstrated the dance routine The Superlatives had taught her. Freddie had the pizza parlor photo hugged to his chest and was watching her raptly. Hannah was able to refill her coffee cup

and sit down at the table without distracting anybody. She was just finishing her plate when she understood that they were behaving in a light-hearted manner in order to minimize her stress. As they were being so entertaining she decided not to say anything.

Glancing at the clock, Hannah went to the bedroom and began folding the blankets. She was stripping the sheets from the mattress when Kelly came in.

A look of stunned disbelief came over her features. "She's taking the bed?"

Hannah chuckled primarily to ease Kelly's distress. "Yes, she is. But she's not getting any bedding to go with it."

"Does she expect you to sleep on the floor?" Kelly's voice was rising.

"I don't think she cares where I sleep as long as it's not on her bed. Besides, I've got a lot of blankets and comforters, so sleeping on the floor is really quite comfortable and I'll get another bed before too long."

Kelly pushed the bedroom door shut with her foot. "Okay. I understand that sleeping on the floor is not the end of the world." Her voice was tight and controlled. "I even understand that it can be comfortable and you are probably not without the means to get a new bed. But this is intolerable."

"Do you really like this bed?" Hannah put as much incredulity as she could in her voice. "I mean, I'm used to it, but it's pretty old and it's not going to last much longer. Especially after the way we mistreated it yesterday." Kelly started to smile. "She sold me the refrigerator, maybe she'll sell you the bed if you want it." She rolled up the dirty sheets and mattress pad and stuffed them in her closet as Kelly started to relax.

"I'd like you to sleep at my place tonight," Kelly finally said. "Do you prefer one side of the bed more than the other?"

Hannah pretended to think it over. "I like the bottom." Kelly moved like a striking snake and she couldn't help but shriek as she was dumped on the bed and pinned. There was no way to avoid being tickled and Hannah screamed hysterically.

Kelly stopped as Freddie stuck his head in the door to tell them that Brenda had arrived. "Thanks," Kelly smiled at him. "I'm establishing my dominance at the moment, but we'll be right out. Stall her, okay?"

"Establishing your dominance?" Hannah laughed as Freddie left grinning.

Kelly poised her fingers for more tickling. "Do you dare to defy me?" she asked with a wicked leer.

"You're the boss!" she agreed quickly. "You're the boss!"

Kelly eased off but remained bent over her. "Maybe later I'll let you be the boss for a while."

"I'd like that," Hannah teased.

Brenda's look of shock when they came out of the bedroom was priceless. Hannah recognized the helpers as Jan and Pat. She had never known their last names and she didn't really know them, but she knew that they were basically good people. "Would you like some coffee?" She wanted this to go as smoothly as possible and being gracious seemed the best hope for that. "There's a fresh pot and cups on the counter, so help yourself if you change your minds."

Per Jay's instructions, Hannah sat down at the table to read the paper he had brought specifically for this purpose and let him handle things. Kelly sat next to her and watched Brenda relentlessly. "What are you doing?" she asked quietly while Brenda was outside.

"Do I look dangerous?"

"Not to me, but I've seen you naked. Are you trying to drive her crazy?"

"I'm trying to look unpredictable."

"You look stoned."

Kelly frowned at her. "Give me the crossword puzzle."

Hannah dug it out and Kelly bent to it with a pen. The next time Brenda came inside, Kelly tipped her head back and chewed on the cap. "Freddie? I need an eight letter word for blunt force trauma."

Hannah lifted her own section of paper a little higher so she could hide her grin.

"Do you have any letters?" Freddie asked.

"First letter B: fourth letter D."

"Bludgeon," Jay suggested after a moment of thought.

"Thanks." Kelly leaned over the paper and scribbled busily. "Let's see," she mused. "I know this one." Kelly spelled aloud as she wrote. "A. U. T. O. P. S. Y."

"Give me another one," Freddie requested.

"Okay. How about asfix...asphyxiate? What does that mean, Hannah?"

It took all of her will power to answer with a straight voice. "It means to strangle."

"Um...not enough letters. I need nine."

"Suffocate!" Freddie called out.

Biting the inside of her cheek was all that kept her from falling to the floor in a fit. "Please," she hissed through her teeth. "Don't make me laugh."

"They're outside arguing," Kelly said a moment later. "You can laugh if you make it quick. I think I'll go offer to help."

"Don't do it," Jay said seriously. "We're halfway through the list and our goal is to have this over with no more malice than necessary."

"Okay," Kelly pouted. "I was just trying to have fun."

"I didn't say you couldn't have fun," Jay grinned. "Just keep it at the table."

Hannah got up and made herself a glass of ice water while she got her hilarity under wraps. She returned to the table and Kelly pushed the crossword puzzle towards her.

"Check it out," she suggested. "I finished it."

Expecting a ploy, Hannah glanced at it and realized it was a note.

"Every time you look at me-every time you touch me-I swear I can feel your hands holding my heart with the most exquisite tenderness. There will never be anyone but you. I love you."

Hannah melted. "I love you, too," she said softly. Kelly was watching the movers again through the front window and Hannah reached out to rub her forearm. She casually looked out the window herself just as Brenda stooped to pick up Cricket. A gush of fear that Brenda would take him propelled her to her feet and down the front walk. "I'll take him," she said nervously.

Brenda turned a cool look on her. "Afraid I'll steal him?"

Hannah held her breath until Cricket was in her arms and hurried him into the house. She didn't relax until he was locked in the backyard. Avoiding worried looks from Kelly and her friends she slipped into the bathroom to collect herself. She had been afraid that Brenda would take him because she had been the one to bring him home in the first place. She had rescued him from the pound for her, but Hannah wasn't sure that Brenda would choose to remember that. Having the house stripped of furniture she could handle, but she would fight to the end for her dog.

She opened the bathroom door just as Brenda passed by and she dropped her eyes in an attempt to avoid notice.

"Tell your pet freak I'm not afraid of her," Brenda jeered.

Hannah experienced something very like a power surge. "She's not a freak!"

Brenda sniffed and turned her back. "She's probably not a she either."

Hannah stepped forward to snatch the hair right out of her head and was grabbed up from behind before she could reach her. "How dare you!" she screeched after her. "You take that back!"

"Hannah!" Kelly spoke sharply against her ear. "Stop it!"

Hannah turned in Kelly's arms as she was lowered to the floor. "Didn't you hear what she said about you?"

Kelly's face was calm, but serious. "You said you could handle it. I told you this sort of thing would happen and you said it was no problem."

"How can you just let it go? Don't you care what people think?"

Kelly held her by the arms intently. "No, I don't. Nothing she says can hurt me; those nerve endings died a long time ago. What I care about is what you think. And it will hurt me if you try to beat up the world because folks are mean to me. She knows I'm a woman, Hannah. She just wants you to hit her. Think of the power that would give her. Don't give it up so easily."

Hannah felt a crushing heartache for Kelly and deep shame that she had tried to hurt Brenda for a few spiteful words. She started to cry and was pulled into Kelly's arms. "I'm so sorry," she wept.

"I know, love. Believe me, it's not always this hard. She can still get under your skin, that's all."

Kelly led her back to the dining room and snuggled her in her lap while Jay and Freddie brusquely directed the final items to be taken, including the bed. Her house looked empty now with her remaining belongings haphazardly stacked along the walls. Imprints of the furniture were still embedded on the carpet and she could see how badly she needed to paint. Freddie was muttering in Spanish and Jay was tight-lipped.

"It feels like I've been robbed," she bawled. "I know it's her stuff and I'm glad to get her out of my life, but I feel violated." Kelly held her tighter. She was still crying when Jay and Freddie came to comfort her.

"It's over," Jay announced. "She's gone and there's no reason for her to come back."

"Ay, mi nena, no llores," Freddie crooned. "*Freddie le va a arrancár el corazon a ésa puta por lo que te hizo. Ella es como una llaga infestada en el culo de todas las lesbianas pordoquier.*"

Hannah understood almost nothing of what he said, but his tone of voice struck her as funny and she was suddenly laughing through her tears.

"*Cuando séa necesario,*" Kelly said, "*díme lo que necesitas. Yó sere tu acomplice o te ayudaré a*

establecer tu cuartada."

"You speak Spanish?" Hannah could not have been more surprised and she sat up to get a better look at her.

"I learned while I was living down in New Mexico." Kelly grinned as Freddie clapped his hands excitedly. "I didn't like how Hispanic people were treated by gringos, so I switched sides. Come to find out they were a lot more interesting and fun to be around."

"Finally!" Freddie exclaimed. "Someone will understand my jokes!"

"Don't count on it," Jay quipped.

~***~

Hannah fell asleep on Kelly's couch while watching TV later that afternoon. She woke briefly as she was tucked into bed and let Kelly remove her clothing before sliding back into dreams. When next she awoke the alarm clock by the bed said it was almost midnight. She was still alone in the huge bed and she wrapped up in a blanket before going in search of Kelly.

She found her in the workroom soldering what appeared to be cell bars for her nephew's police station with the radio on so low it was barely audible.

"Did I wake you?" Kelly asked.

Hannah shook her head and snuggled up to her back with her arms around her. "I was lonely. Can I stay with you?"

Kelly began to sway from side to side on her stool. "I'm not having much success here. I'd be more than happy to come to bed."

"No, this is nice." Hannah let herself drift and was almost asleep on her feet. Before long, Kelly put her things away and turned off the radio. She led Hannah back to bed and Hannah spooned her from behind. "Say something to me in Spanish," she requested sleepily.

Kelly was silent a moment, then began to speak. "*Tú eres el amor de mi vida. Yo nunca me aprovecharé de ti o abusaré de ti a sabiendas. Yo me ofrezco a ti como amante, esposa, protectora, y para servirte estoy. Yo te voy a querer en salud y enfermedad, seamos ricos o pobres, en tiempo buenos y tiempos malos, por todos los días de mi vida. Esto lo hago yo libremente y sin reservaciones, estando entre tus brazos o sin ellos.*"

The cadence and rhythm of it was like a song and Hannah let it pull her emotions. When Kelly fell silent, she sighed. "What did you say?"

"That I love you. Go to sleep, *amante.*"

"You said more than that."

"There are many ways to say 'I love you'," Kelly said with a yawn.

~***~

Hannah left Kelly asleep in the bed. Wanting Kelly to know that she would be coming back, she left Cricket with her. It was still early so Hannah went home first to change clothes. Her house seemed strange to her and she wondered how long it would take for that feeling to go away.

At the Murdock's, her first order of business was coffee. She found that half of the residents used the smell of coffee as a wake up call and that made her job easier. As they started to poke their heads out, Hannah greeted each one and helped them with their clothes as needed.

"Something has made you very happy," Nana said as she came into the room.

"I'm the same as always," Hannah asserted.

Nana looked at her with piercing eyes. "Liar. Something has happened."

Hannah sighed. "Can we get breakfast out of the way before we talk about it? There's a lot to tell you."

"But you are happy, yes?"

A silly grin forced its way onto her face. "Very. Now get dressed." She got everyone into the dining room, gave them all their various medications and injections, then announced that she was taking orders for breakfast. The usual routine was to make one thing, usually a warm cereal with toast or English muffins, but this morning she felt generous. It made breakfast more difficult, but it made all of them feel that today was going to be special.

After cleaning up, she sat down with her grandmother at the table to visit. It wasn't long before everyone except Mr. Levin and Mrs. Halvorsen had joined them and wanted to know what was going on. Nana had made sure that everyone knew Hannah was a lesbian a long time ago. Mr. Levin and Mrs. Halvorsen were upset by it, but had learned that it was better not to say so in front of Nana. The others seemed to be fascinated by it. They didn't approve of lesbianism per se, but they liked Hannah. She wondered sometimes if they didn't see her life as the equivalent of a train wreck and couldn't help but look.

It was hard to explain the last couple of weeks to so many people all at once. It felt risky and dangerous, but they all seemed so interested and they drew her out with questions. When she told them about Brenda's claims regarding the rent and the house, she received a long lecture from them all about being married and the difficulties of being totally committed to another person.

"You need to have a common goal," Mrs. Standish insisted. "Something that you do together. Me and my husband had our children, but I don't suppose you will ever have babies of your own, so

you will need to pick something else. Maybe one of you will work harder at it than the other one and maybe one of you will spend more money on it, but it has to be something that is important to both of you. The marriage can not work without a purpose to bind it together."

"She's talking about a house," Mr. Blackney snorted. "I had our house in my name and my wife never complained that she wasn't important."

"Times are different now," Nana said. "You were married, but my Hannah can not be married. You knew that your wife would get all of your property if you died. If Hannah dies, they will make me take it because I am her relative. Even if she loves someone for 30 years, they still get nothing."

Mr. Blackney frowned uncomfortably and Hannah could see him struggling with ideas that he had never faced before. The fact that he was even willing to think about the issue made her respect him more.

"It is not a real marriage unless everything is shared," Mrs. Standish said.

"And if it doesn't work?" Hannah asked. "Am I supposed to risk losing my house?"

Mrs. Benson reached out a fragile hand and patted her arm. "A woman should have the means to start over in case something terrible happens, but Mrs. Standish is right. If you will risk all of your heart, how can you not risk all of your belongings?"

"It's not just my house, though. It's also my business."

"Your business is in your skills, not your location," Nana said. "Your clients will come to you if you are working out of a cardboard box on the sidewalk. True?"

Hannah conceded the point.

"Well, I think she did the right thing," Mr. Blackney grinned. "After all, it didn't work out with what's-her-name. I hope you threw her out on her ear."

Hannah filled them in on the previous day's activities. Mr. Blackney scowled, Mrs. Benson and Mrs. Standish clucked and Nana shook her head sadly.

"How much did she take?" Mr. Blackney wanted to know.

"Let's see. I have a dining table and chairs, nightstands, some lamps and a stereo left. She took the rest."

They were all quiet and Hannah brought them more decaf coffee. Nana finally broke the silence.

"So, why do you look so happy?"

Hannah blushed deeply and could not look at them. "Before Brenda came back, I met someone."

All four elders seemed pleased. Mrs. Benson reached out to her again. "This is wonderful, dear. It is another woman?"

"Yes." Hannah thought it funny that they still thought her options in that regard were open.

"At least she's consistent," Mr. Blackney chortled.

"Do you love her?" Mrs. Standish asked.

"Yes. I haven't known her very long, but I think sometimes you just know."

"Does she love you?" Mr. Blackney asked.

"She does."

"So, tell us all about her," Mrs. Standish insisted.

"Well, she's really strong and quite tall. She has short blond hair and she's an auto mechanic, but she has..."

Mr. Blackney squinted at Nana. "Sounds like that girl who came to see you."

"What was her name again?" Mrs. Standish asked.

Hannah's mouth dropped open and she stared at her grandmother who was trying to shush the others. "Nana?"

"It was someone else," her grandmother said. "Go on and finish."

Hannah stared at her a moment longer. "Anyway, she was in the Army and she makes the most amazing dollhouses for her nieces." They were all staring at her and it made her nervous. "Her name is Kelly Lowell."

"That was it?" Mrs. Standish crowed. "I had it on the tip of my tongue."

"She was very sweet," Mrs. Benson said softly.

"I thought she was a man," Mr. Blackney said, "until I saw her..." He mimed breasts and the women chastised him for it.

"When was she here?" she asked with incredulity.

"Last week sometime," Mrs. Standish guessed. "She even helped Mr. Murdock to fix the van's chair lift. Very nice of her."

"Is she really a woman?" Mr. Blackney asked.

Hannah ignored his question and focused on her grandmother's resigned face. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Nana reached out and patted her leg. "I didn't call her, Hannah. She showed up about a week ago and wanted to talk to me."

"About what?"

"You-her feelings for you-her intentions." Nana raised her coffee cup and took a drink. "It was refreshing and rather old fashioned."

Hannah was shocked and didn't know what to feel. "Was she asking for you to intercede?"

"No, no, no," Nana clucked. "She was worried about you and she seemed lonely, but I think she was just letting me know where she stood. She promised she would leave you alone if you didn't want her and that she would never mistreat you if you did."

"And what did you tell her?"

Nana grinned wickedly. "That you're stubborn when you're wrong, belligerent when you don't get your way and cranky when you're tired."

"You didn't?" Hannah covered her face as the elders laughed at her. "Why didn't you tell me she had been here? Did she ask you not to tell me?"

"On the contrary. I think she knew I would tell you. I just didn't see any point at the time. Besides," Nana soothed, "it's all worked out for the best now, hasn't it?"

"How come she dresses like a man is what I want to know," Mr. Blackney persisted.

Hannah rested her chin in her hand. "She is a woman," she said patiently, "and lots of women wear jeans and T-shirts. Kelly isn't trying to look like a man; she just looks like herself and I think she's beautiful. She has incredible skin and long, thick eyelashes. I've seen her in a dress and she looks more like a man in a dress than she does in jeans. There are all kinds of women out there and she's just one kind."

Chapter Twelve

Hannah stopped at the supermarket on her way back to Kelly's apartment to pick up food for Cricket. While she was there she picked up sodas, beer, fruit for a tropical salad and the makings for burritos. She was trying to decide what flavor of ice cream to buy when an arm fell over her shoulders. Startled, she tried to jump back and realized it was Cantina. "You scared me?"

"Sorry about that," Cantina laughed. "I just wanted to surprise you."

Hannah laughed at how pleased Cantina seemed to be with herself. "How are you?"

"Not as good as you," Cantina leered. "Not that I got any details from Kelly, but she looks pretty good, too, so I'd say I'm right on the mark. I just saw you in here and decided to check what we're having for dinner."

"We?"

"Have you talked to her in the last hour?"

Hannah shook her head and reached in for Mint Chip ice cream. As she set it in the cart, Cantina shook her head doubtfully. Hannah lifted it back out and returned it to the shelf. "What kind does she like?"

"She likes anything chocolate," she said as she searched for the right one, "but she likes this one that's got orange sherbet and vanilla mixed with chocolate pieces in it the best." She located the right one and tossed it in the basket. "I stopped by Kelly's earlier and your little puppy was there so I made her fill me in on the highlights. I tried to invite myself to dinner, but she said she had to discuss it with you first. I thought that's what you were doing here."

"I just got off work and I'm on my way back to her place, but it's fine with me if you come. What time and how many extra people?"

"It's my husband's day to play mommy, so it'll just be me and I can come now."

"Well," Hannah said reluctantly. "I need to talk to her about something first so why don't you come at five?"

Cantina broke into a smile. "Okay?"

"Is there anything else I should get?"

Kelly's friend sifted through her basket. "Looks good to me. If I think of anything else, I'll bring it myself."

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Halfway up the steps, Kelly was there, taking the bags from her hands. "Thanks, babe."

"What all did you buy?"

"I only stopped to get food for Cricket, but then I got carried away." She closed the front door and leaned over to pet Cricket as Kelly set the groceries down on the dining table.

"How was your day?" Kelly asked as she kissed her forehead.

Hannah carefully sat down at the table and looked into her lover's eyes. "Why did you go to see my grandmother?"

Kelly sat down, too. "I know I shouldn't have, but I was lonely and scared. I just wanted to tell someone how I felt. Cantina would have teased me even more. And my folks-well, they care about me too much to just let things work themselves out. They would have been trying to fix things. Mrs. Archer was the only one left."

"So you weren't trying to use Nana to get..."

Kelly's face was horrified. "No? Don't even think that? I told her that she could tell you-that there were no secrets..."

Hannah took Kelly's hand and brought it to her lips. "I just wanted to be sure." She stood up to put the groceries away and Kelly anxiously took her arm.

"Are you mad at me?"

Hannah could see genuine concern in Kelly's eyes. Using both hands she tipped Kelly's face up and kissed her lightly, then spread kisses all over her face. She stopped, high on Kelly's long neck, and sucked skin hard between her teeth. She heard Kelly grunt and kept up the pressure for a moment, then let go and looked to make sure there would be a mark. Pleased with the small bruise, she patted Kelly's cheek and smiled. "I'm over it now."

"What am I going to tell the guys at work?" she asked as she fingered her throat.

"Tell them you were a bad girl," Hannah laughed.

Kelly shook her head in amusement and reached into a bag to pull out the ice cream. "Whoa. This is so weird."

Hannah kept her grin under wraps. "I hope you like that kind."

Kelly looked at her in disbelief. "Cantina *loves* this stuff."

"What?" Hannah couldn't believe it. "But she said it was your favorite?"

Kelly started to laugh. "You have to watch out for her. She's tricky."

Understanding came over Hannah. "Did you invite her for dinner?"

"No? I told her that you and I had other plans."

Hannah dropped back into her chair with a groan. "She'll be here at five. Does she always do this sort of thing?"

Kelly got up and put the ice cream in the freezer. "Usually she doesn't get away with it, but you didn't know about her dark side and I think she was counting on it. I can call her and cancel."

"No, that's okay. I don't mind. You spent time with my friends and I want to get to know yours better." Hannah fished a beer out of a bag and opened it. "What were our other plans?" Her pulse raced as Kelly gave her the look. "Oh." Hannah swallowed hard. "What time did you get up?"

"Cricket woke me up at 7:30 to take him out for a walk."

"What did you do the rest of the time?"

"I showered. Watched the news. Cantina came over. Not much really."

"Did you miss me?"

"Completely." Kelly joined her at the table with her own beer and Hannah studied her hands. "I don't know if I can stand it."

"What?"

"Your hands." She reached out and ran her fingers over them. "I don't think I can stand other people seeing them."

Kelly looked confused. "What's wrong with them?"

Hannah hitched her chair closer and held Kelly's hands to her face. "How would you feel if I walked down Main Street topless?"

Kelly grinned, but it gradually faded as she thought about it. "I don't think I'd like it much, but everyone has hands. It's not the same."

"No one has hands like yours," Hannah murmured against them. "They are as much a part of your sex as your breasts and your... You know."

"My 'you know'?" Kelly chuckled. "Is that what you call it?"

Hannah was embarrassed. "I don't call it anything. I don't like any of the words for it. They're

either inaccurate or dirty." Kelly's hands began to stroke her face.

"Men make the words dirty. I think they're secretly ashamed of their own genitals. Not just how they look, but how inadequate they really are. It makes them feel better about themselves to make ours seem inferior. No matter what we call our own genitals, men will use it against us. They'll make it nasty and obscene. Our only option is to take back the names and be proud of them. If we do that they won't be able to use the words as weapons anymore."

Hannah's breath caught as Kelly lifted her easily onto her lap. She offered no resistance as her blouse and bra were removed. "What do you call it?"

"In defiance, I chose to love the most hated word of all: cunt."

Hannah was shocked. "Why?" Kelly lifted Hannah's arms and folded them on top of her head. Holding them there with one hand, she used the other to stroke and tease her. Icy fire raced under her skin and Hannah couldn't quite catch her breath.

"Vagina, clitoris and labia define individual parts of the whole."

Hannah lowered her eyes to watch Kelly's rough hands trailing softly over her breasts and belly, the words echoing pleasurably in her head.

"Pussy, beaver, peach and the like are frivolous and dehumanizing."

Kelly's quiet, matter of fact voice was as arousing as her touch and Hannah thrilled at them both.

"Pudenda means 'shame' and I refuse to be ashamed of such an incredible part of our bodies."

Hannah gasped as Kelly slid her hand down to cup between her legs. Kelly's eyes were somehow hard and liquid at the same time.

"This is a serious thing. It deserves a strong and serious name. This is your cunt, Hannah. Say it for me."

Embarrassed, she braced herself to speak. "Cunt." She had meant to say it with force and confidence, but it came out as a squeak.

Kelly smiled. "It's hard to say at first." Her hand moved back to Hannah's breasts. "It used to be that calling a woman a bitch was cruel and hurtful. But women have taken the word back. Women stand up straight and proud and announce that they are bitches. It gives them power and it takes power from those who want to hurt them. Cunt is a magical word. The more you say it and think it, the more you come to love it. When you love it, it will make you feel strong and powerful."

Kelly let go of her arms and both hands roamed over Hannah's skin. She wanted to wrap her arms around Kelly and hold her tight, but instead she laced her fingers behind her neck and

spread her elbows out like wings. This thrust her breasts forward and she closed her eyes as they were taken in Kelly's hands.

"You are so beautiful," Kelly whispered ruggedly. "The way you look, the softness of your skin, the smell of your excitement, the taste..."

Hannah groaned and arched into Kelly's mouth as it came to her nipples.

"The sounds of you..." Kelly murmured. "You overwhelm me."

Hannah grasped Kelly's head and held it to her. She wanted Kelly to be relentless and unstoppable, but didn't know how to ask. Kelly was so tall and so strong that it made her feel small and helpless. She *knew* she was perfectly safe, but there was something about the passion Kelly evoked in her that made her aware of her vulnerability. No one else had ever made her feel that way and if asked she would have denied any desire to experience it. The fact that she wanted more of it now made her uncomfortable, but when Kelly was setting fires under her skin she didn't care if it was wrong or bad. She only knew that she wanted it.

"Make me," she pleaded in Kelly's ear.

Kelly pulled back and looked into her eyes. "So soon?"

Hannah grasped the short blond hair in her fingers and growled. "Be strong with me."

Her eyes held uncertainty and regret. "I don't think I can hurt you, Hannah."

"No? Not that?" She pushed her breasts harder into Kelly's hands as she searched for the right words. "Make me defenseless. Control me. I want to feel..." She yelped as Kelly stood up abruptly and threw her over her shoulder. Scared she would slide down the broad back to fall on the floor, she clutched at Kelly's waist. Her shoes and socks were peeled off and she noted them with surprise as they dropped to the floor in a trail down the hallway.

In one dizzy move she was on her back on the bed with her jeans around her knees. Feeling a little frightened she tried to back away on her elbows, but Kelly placed a knee on her jeans and she was trapped. She reached out with both hands to slow her down and they were captured in one of Kelly's larger ones and forced over her head.

"Kelly?"

Her underwear was pulled down roughly and gentle fingers slid inside of her. Eroticism gripped her in an iron fist and she cried out. "Yes?" Kelly's mouth moved hungrily over her breasts and Hannah writhed with need. All too soon she was coming and lights flashed behind her eyes. Kelly's hands released her and still she couldn't move.

"Did I hurt you?" Kelly asked with genuine concern.

Still trying to quiet the pounding of her heart, Hannah shook her head.

Kelly's fingers brushed hair and tears from her face. "Are you okay?"

Hannah nodded silently, unsure how to feel about what had just happened.

"I love you so much. I tried not to hurt you." Kelly stretched out next to her and lay her head on Hannah's shoulder. "That was a little scary."

Hannah lifted one hand and stroked Kelly's head. "For me, too. But...I liked it."

"Me, too," Kelly said quietly. "Was it what you wanted?"

"Yes." Hannah pulled her feet out of her jeans and kicked them to the floor. She pushed Kelly to her back and sat astride her hips. That Kelly was still fully dressed made desire flare up again. "I always feel some of that with you."

"Some of what?"

"Helpless. Vulnerable. Out of control." She ground her hips against Kelly and smiled at her gasp. "Do you ever feel like that with me?"

Kelly's hands eased over her thighs. "Every time I look at you I feel weak. When you touch me, I can't think straight."

Hannah eased her hands under Kelly's shirt and held her breasts. "Do you ever feel overpowered by me?"

"Not physically, no." Kelly licked her lips. "But I feel like my heart is on the outside of my body. When I'm with you it feels like my life is on the line. I guess I feel emotionally vulnerable."

Hannah pushed the T-shirt out of the way and placed her lips over Kelly's heart. "I will try not to ever hurt you," she promised.

She took her time with Kelly: undressing her inches at a time and using her own pleasure as a lure until Kelly was breathless and frantic. Her mindless chant, "*please please please...*" made Hannah grateful to be alive. Feeling the powerful body helpless in orgasm brought tears to her eyes.

Familiar now with Kelly's post-coital torpor, Hannah picked up her T-shirt and used it to wipe sweat from her lover's neck and between her breasts. A slight noise from the hallway drew her attention and she spotted Cricket waiting for permission to join them.

"Come on, boy." She patted Kelly's leg and the little dog ran towards her with a flying leap to the bed. He ran up Kelly's stomach and she began to laugh. Hannah let him kiss her face and smiled when he gave kisses to Kelly as well. "He feels a little left out," she explained.

"Do you suppose he watched all of that?"

"I'm sure he did," Hannah laughed. "Next time we'll close the door."

Kelly scratched under his chin. "As long as he doesn't try to participate, I don't mind. My old dog, Reba, used to wait until you were getting busy and then lick your butt. It was very distracting."

Hannah laughed helplessly at the image in her head. Cricket responded to her laughter with a happy dance on Kelly's chest and she scooped him up under one arm as she sat up. Hannah watched Kelly walk down the hallway, Cricket's stubby little tail pumping madly, and enjoyed the view even more when she came back holding their bottles of beer.

"You're a beautiful woman, Kelly."

Kelly tossed Cricket to the bed and handed her a beer. "Hardly."

Hannah took a drink while she worked out how to go on. "I love you."

Kelly's smile was almost painful. "I love you, too."

Hannah sat up and folded her legs. "If you can believe that I love you, why is it so hard to believe that you are beautiful?"

Kelly collected her cast off clothing and tossed it towards a laundry basket. "It must be love if you think I'm pretty."

"I didn't say pretty. I said beautiful." Kelly looked as if she were tolerating Hannah's words. "Don't you think a strong woman can be beautiful?"

"Yes. But strength doesn't automatically equate with beauty."

"It does in your case." Hannah set her beer on the nightstand and reached for Kelly's arm. "Make a muscle." Kelly laughed nervously and stepped back. Hannah followed her and wrapped her hands around an upper arm. "Please?" Kelly blushed, but she raised her arm to a classic position and flexed.

Hannah hummed with pleasure at the large knot of muscle in her hands and she explored the shape of it. Reaching for the other arm, Kelly obliged with another flex. She dipped under her arm and laid her hands on her back. "Show me."

Hannah had to reach up to explore the broad shoulders. Muscles came to life before her eyes. Kelly's spine was a long valley down the center of her back and she spread her hands out with her thumbs centered in it.

"I feel stupid," Kelly said nervously.

Hannah's mouth was dry and she almost choked trying to get the words out. "You're amazing." She moved her hands out over Kelly's shoulder blades and slowly ran them down the tapered length of her. She spoke quietly as she explored how short, bunched muscles gave way to long, flat ones. "I've seen women on television-body builders and wrestlers-with bodies like yours. I've never been attracted to them before, but there's something about your body that I find terribly exciting." She dropped her hands to Kelly's ass and felt the roundness bunch under her palms. "There's a hardness to you, but it only accentuates the softness of your skin."

She knelt and ran her hands over the long muscles of her thighs and the short, high ones of her calves. "I'm surprised you shave your legs. I didn't expect that."

"I usually don't," Kelly admitted. "I did it for you."

Hannah smiled and used her hands to turn Kelly. "You don't have to if you don't want to. It makes no difference to me."

Kelly tightened her thighs and Hannah followed them to her groin. Rising to her feet, she smiled as her fingers tangled in pubic hair. "I'm familiar with these muscles." Kelly smiled back.

Hannah spread her hands over Kelly's abdomen and felt the muscles harden under the skin. She couldn't see them, but her fingers could trace each one.

"I'd need to lose weight for those to show up," Kelly said in a voice tight with strain.

"That doesn't sound healthy," Hannah frowned. "I shudder to think how low your body fat is already. Please don't do it for me."

"Do you want to see something weird?"

Hannah smiled, curious at Kelly's embarrassment. "Okay." Kelly's face was beet red as her breasts jumped independently and Hannah burst out laughing. "Oh, my God? I didn't think women could do that. Do it again."

She couldn't help but laugh as Kelly's breasts bounced in odd rhythms. She reached out to stop them and they jumped in her hands. Hannah stepped back and looked down at her own breasts. She concentrated, but nothing happened. Puzzled, she said, "I can feel them, but it's like there's no connection. It feels like my body doesn't know how to interpret the instructions. Maybe I don't have those muscles."

"You have them," Kelly laughed. "But yours are beautiful and don't need to know tricks."

Hannah smiled as she put her arms around Kelly and buried her face in her chest. She could feel Kelly's chin on the top of her head. "Is it strange to hug someone so short?"

"I don't know. I've never held anyone my height."

Hannah reached up and put her arms around Kelly's neck. Pulling herself up she scissored Kelly's waist with her legs. "How about now?"

"This is good, too."

Hanging on tightly, Hannah covered Kelly's mouth with her own and kissed her. Their kiss deepened and she drew Kelly's tongue into her mouth as she was lowered to the bed.

Later, Kelly was lying on the bed recovering as Hannah looked over at the bedside clock. "Your sneaky friend is going to be here in twenty minutes. Can I wear something of yours?"

Kelly made a small noise that Hannah took as consent and she went to the largest dresser. She smiled at the tangled mess of underwear and socks in the top drawer. The rest of Kelly's apartment was so neat she had expected the same military precision in her clothing. The next drawer held T-shirts and while they were folded, they were still disorganized.

"I think there's a blue one in there that might fit you," Kelly said lazily.

Hannah didn't want one that fit. She wanted one that fit Kelly, so she took a gray one off the top. As she started to close the drawer she spotted a box off to one side. For a moment she was so startled she couldn't speak. "There are bullets in your drawer."

"I know."

Hannah closed the drawer and hugged the shirt to her chest as she turned. "Of course you would have a gun," she babbled. "You told me you went shooting and after all you were in the Army. Why didn't I expect that? I should have been surprised if you didn't have a gun."

"Are you all right?" Kelly lifted her head off the pillow to look at her.

"I don't think I've ever known someone who actually had a gun. They never seemed quite real to me."

"It's in the nightstand if you want to see it."

She didn't, but she couldn't help it. She sat down next to Kelly and forced herself to open the small drawer. Hannah knew almost nothing about guns, even in theory. It was much larger than she expected, but regardless of its effort at elegance, she felt that she was just inches from a deadly-and very angry-snake. "Is it loaded?"

"Yes."

Hannah felt gooseflesh prickling her skin. "It scares me."

"It should," Kelly said firmly. "Its sole purpose is to kill people."

Hannah shuddered involuntarily and quickly pushed the drawer closed. Kelly's arms drew her down and she snuggled gratefully into her warmth. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"No," Kelly answered. "And I hope I never have to, but if there's no other choice, I'll do it in a heartbeat."

Hannah's mind raced uncomfortably. "Are you a good shooter with it?"

"Am I a good shot?" Kelly's arms tightened a bit. "Don't expect to see me in the Olympics any time soon, but I do okay. There's a range up on Old Canyon Road that I go to every couple of weeks. You can come watch sometime if you like. Someday, if you ever want to, I can teach you about them. It's kind of relaxing."

Hannah's distress started to ease and she felt silly. "How many guns do you have?"

"Only the one." Kelly brushed her hair aside and began kissing her neck while she spoke. "I used to have almost a dozen, but my last therapist said I was overcompensating. When I stopped being mad I realized she was right, so I sold all of them to a dealer. That was when I stopped working out so hard. I was trying to make myself invulnerable, but it's impossible."

Hannah was struck by an image of Kelly, armed and buffed out in order to protect herself from ever being hurt again. "It must have been a hard time for you."

"It was brutal getting to clarity, but once I understood what I was doing and saw how useless it all was, I felt incredible. Everything I had been doing was feeding my fear and giving it power over me. When I let it go, I discovered that my fear was afraid of itself. I still have the occasional dream and some men make me nervous, but for the most part, fear leaves me alone. The older I get the more I understand that strength is in your mind, not in your fist."

Cricket yipped from the living room before she could respond and Kelly bolted up as the doorbell was pushed repeatedly. "Cantina," she hissed. "I swear I'm going to paddle her for this."

Hannah laughed and pulled on the T-shirt as Kelly dove for the dresser. The shirt came to mid thigh and Hannah felt decently covered, so she closed the bedroom door and went to let Cantina in. "Hey? Come on in."

Cantina held up a shopping bag with a grin. "Chocolate ice cream by way of an apology and I also...I thought you were just going to talk. Look at this place?"

Hannah looked around to see her clothing strewn about and the dining room chair tipped over. *Funny, I don't remember that.* Embarrassed, she began to gather her things. "We did talk, you know."

"Oh sure, I believe you." Cantina laughed. "You probably shouldn't bend over like that though."

Mortified, Hannah raced for the bedroom. Leaning back against the inside of the door she saw the humor in it and began to laugh at herself.

"What is it?" Kelly was just pulling up a pair of sweats.

"She's teasing me, babe. Shoot her."

Kelly laughed back as she pulled a shirt over her head. "What did she say?"

"She told me not to bend over." Hannah tossed her clothes at the bed and lifted her shirt to wiggle a naked hip at Kelly.

Kelly sidled up to her and pinned her to the door. "Do you want me to shave her head?"

"Maybe just a circle on the top," she whispered back. She put her hands behind Kelly's neck and pulled, pleased when Kelly cupped her ass and lifted her. "In the back where she can't see it." She could feel the vibrations of Cantina's knocking on the door at her back. "Will she go away if we ignore her?"

"Not a chance," Kelly murmured into her neck. "We'll have to feed her first."

"I can hear you guys whispering," Cantina complained. "Is this any way to treat a guest?"

"A self-invited, manipulating guest," Kelly said loudly. "Cool your jets, girl. We're getting dressed."

"I doubt it," Cantina grouched.

Kelly sighed. "I don't think we should let her meet Freddie."

Hannah laughed and pushed at Kelly's shoulders. "We have to eat anyway," she said as she was set on her feet. "Next time I just won't answer the door."

Kelly grabbed a pair of shorts from the dresser and knelt to hold them open for her. "It wouldn't do any good. She still has a key. I've tried to take it away from her, but I think she's got it hidden outside somewhere. I can never find it on her."

Hannah stepped into the shorts and let Kelly pull them up. She had been undressed any number of times in her life, but she couldn't remember ever being dressed by someone. She put her hands on strong shoulders and tried to find some reason not to do what she wanted to do. Unable to find one, she threw caution to the wind. "She doesn't have a key to my house."

"Good idea," Kelly whispered as she tightened the drawstring about her waist. "Next time we'll go to your place."

Hannah swallowed. "I was thinking...every time." She watched Kelly's easy smile change to one of hopeful wonder.

"You mean...?"

Hannah's hands trembled as she cupped Kelly's face. "Come live with me."

"Are you sure?"

"I know it's soon. Maybe even too soon, but I have a feeling about us. I want you with me, and not because you have furniture. Please, Kelly, say yes?"

"Yes?" Kelly scooped her up and spun in circles. "Yes? Yes? Yes?"

Hannah hung on tight, laughing hysterically, as Kelly celebrated. When they ran into the bed, Kelly dropped her and turned to yank open the door.

"She wants me to live with her?" Kelly shouted to a surprised Cantina. She spun back to the bed and began to jump on it. The third leap made her head connect with the ceiling and she dropped to her back like her strings had been cut.

Hannah reached for her. "Are you okay?"

"We'll be great together," Kelly sighed happily as she pulled Hannah into her arms. "I'll never hurt you and I'll keep my things picked up. I won't smoke anymore. I'll pay my share on time and I'll..."

Hannah put her hand over Kelly's mouth and turned to a grinning Cantina. "Will you give us two minutes, please?"

Cantina pouted, but humor peeked through her expression. "I never get to see any of the good stuff. It's just not fair."

When the door closed, Hannah turned back to Kelly and saw tears. "I only want two promises. Don't ever tell me you love me when you don't and when you do love me, tell me all the time."

Kelly pulled her hand away. "I do love you, Hannah. Those are the easiest promises I'll ever make."

"I'm not easy to live with," Hannah warned. "I'm bossy and unreasonable and..."

"I don't care," Kelly interrupted. "I'm no picnic either. I'm moody and I like time alone. My friends call me out for car emergencies at all hours and my family..." Kelly groaned. "Oh, god. You haven't met my family. You may want to reconsider."

"I thought you said they were great."

"They are. But taken in a group it's kind of like Cantina on steroids. My mom's going to ask you in the first five minutes if you want children."

"I'll just tell her that I have complete faith in your ability to pull it off."

Kelly chuckled. "*Do* you want children?"

Hannah shook her head firmly. "Not in the slightest."

Kelly sighed in relief. "Then I only see one problem."

Hannah wiped at her tears. "What's that?"

"We still have to feed Cantina."

EPILOGUE

"I heard another rumor today."

Kelly's hand hesitated ever so slightly in caressing Hannah's back. "Jill?"

Perfectly content, Hannah didn't move from her spot on Kelly's shoulder. "Mmm hmm."

A sigh came from the tall woman. "You know, it never ceases to amaze me how a woman with so much natural class and intelligence can be such a fishwife about gossip."

Hannah giggled at the truth of that statement. "Be nice, baby. She's my friend."

"I know. Mine, too." Kelly's arm tightened briefly. "So, what's the scuttlebutt this time?"

"Apparently...we're happy."

Kelly threw her arms out on the bed. "Good God! What will they think of next?"

Hannah laughed in delight. "I know! After all of the mean, crappy things people have said about us, and now this? It defies all reason."

Kelly chuckled softly. "My favorite was you being a dominatrix in disguise."

Hannah lightly slapped the flat belly under her hand. "Keep dreaming, baby."

"Oh, I will. I will."

"You and your twisted fantasies," Hannah teased lovingly.

"Heh heh."

Hannah snuggled a little closer. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about an idea I had."

"Okay."

She was a little nervous to be bringing it up, but she'd thought about it from every angle and had decided that it really was what she wanted to do. "You know how you talk sometimes about starting your own shop?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've figured out how to do it sooner rather than later."

"Oh, really? Lay it on me, sweetie."

Hannah closed her eyes and crossed her mental fingers. "All right. After you ask me to marry you, I'll put your name on the deed to the house." She felt Kelly go very still and rushed on so she could get it all out. "We can mortgage it for whatever you want because it's all paid for. You're a vet, so you can probably get some help on that front, too, and then we can use the money to start Family Motors. I'll still have my shop, so we'll have enough money to get by while you get things rolling. It could work."

Kelly was silent for a long moment. "I'm not going to marry you for the house or the money, Hannah."

"Of course not. You'll marry me for love."

Kelly shifted and rolled Hannah to her back. Leaning over her, she looked into her eyes intently. "You can't risk your home and your business on my dream, honey. You just can't."

Hannah reached up and put a hand to the side of Kelly's face. "I've never wanted to do anything more in my life, Kelly. You are the best choice I ever made and I want to bet everything that I have, everything that I am, on our future. I don't want to hold anything back. I don't see it as a risk. It'll be an adventure."

Kelly shook her head. "I don't know the first thing about running a business."

"I do. So does Freddie. And you know that Jay will be a huge help. Heck, even Jill will be useful considering all of her experience with advertising and promotion. We'll all teach you. Besides,

it's the vision that's important and you have tons of that. You talk all the time about how you would do things different and your ideas rock. We can do this, baby. I *want* to do this."

"But to risk your home?"

"I'm going to put your name on the house regardless, Kelly. I don't even think of it as my house anymore. It's *our* house. I already talked to Nana about this and she told me that a house is just a tool. *Home* is in our hearts. She's behind this decision one hundred percent. So am I. Let's use this house to make your dream a reality."

There were tears in Kelly's eyes. "*You're* my dream, honey."

"And you're mine. But, we're allowed to have more than one dream. Say you'll think about it?"

Kelly lowered her head to Hannah's shoulder silently. Several minutes passed. "Okay. We'll think about it. There's a lot of research and planning to do, so we're not going to rush into anything."

Hannah sighed in relief. She had been so worried that Kelly would reject it out of hand.

"As for the first part of your little plan..." Kelly raised her head and there was a wicked glint in her eye.

"Yes?" Kelly laughed and a shiver of anticipation shot through Hannah.

"When I ask you to marry me, it will be for no other reason than because I love you. Is that clear?"

Hannah hid her smile. "Yes, baby."

THE END

This is the third story I've written set in the fictional city of Edgewater. It's a great place to live. The sun always shines - unless rain is needed for dramatic effect. It's not too big, not too small, and justice always prevails. I have a much better job there, too, and all the women want me. There will be a fourth story set in Edgewater....as soon as I write it.

To all the people who have sent emails and left recommendations, I love you guys.

TRANSLATIONS

Compañeros
Companions

Ola
Hello

Amante
Lover

Tu nuevo amor.
Your new love

"Ay, mi nena, no llores. Freddie le va a arrancár el corazon a ésa puta por lo que te hizo. Ella es como una llaga infestada en el culo de todas las lesbianas pordoquier."

"Oh, my poor baby, don't cry. Freddie will rip that whore's heart out for doing this to you. She is a festering sore on the ass of lesbians everywhere."

"Cuando séa necesario, díme lo que necesitas. Yó sere tu acomplice o te ayudaré a establecer tu cuartada."

"When the time comes, I'll be your alibi or your accomplice. Just let me know which you need."

"Tú eres el amor de mi vida. Yo nunca me aprovecharé de ti o abusaré de ti a sabiendas. Yo me ofrezco a ti como amante, esposa, protectora, y para servirte estoy. Yo te voy a querer en salud y enfermedad, seamos ricas o pobres, en tiempo buenos y tiempos malos, por todos los días de mi vida. Esto lo hago yo libremente y sin reservaciones, estando entre tus brazos o sin ellos."

"You are the love of my life. I will never knowingly abuse you, cheat on you or take advantage of you. I offer myself to you as your lover, your wife, your protector, your servant. I will cherish you in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, good times and bad times for all the days of my life. I do this freely and without reservation, whether it be within the circle of your arms or not."
