

~ Shine ~

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, lesbianism, mild violence and references to domestic violence. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. This will still be here when you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...lock the door and have at it.

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

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ONE

"I think I'm ready to date again," Maureen announced after Jim and Carol had ushered their kids to bed. "It's been nine months since Beth put me..." Her throat tightened and she couldn't speak. Even after so much time she still could hardly bring herself to say it out loud.

"It's about time," Carol interrupted firmly. "I know you needed time to heal physically and emotionally, but I've always thought that getting back on the horse was best. I'm glad you've finally come to your senses."

Maureen wasn't at all sure that her decision could be termed sensible. In retrospect, her choices in women had all turned out to be rather poor and there was no way to tell if her heart had wised up. All she knew was that as easy as it was to be alone, she was tired of being lonely. Somewhere out there was a woman she could build a life with and she wanted to find her. "There's a reason I'm telling you," she said nervously.

"Looking for a chaperone?" Jim asked lightly.

Maureen had considered this moment for weeks. Jim was the engineer at a local radio station and knew Shine Avery. Maureen had been listening to that husky, velvet voice for over 4 years and knew from Jim that she was gay. She had expected to run into Shine accidentally through the local gay community a long time ago, but it seemed that no one knew of her. Having no other interesting women in her field of view, she had talked herself into at least meeting the remote

disc jockey. She remained a little uncomfortable asking her friends to help her. "Not exactly. I need an introduction."

"To whom?" Carol asked.

Maureen watched as understanding widened Jim's eyes. "You want to meet Shine, don't you?"

"What a great idea," Carol said enthusiastically. "Maybe we could invite her over for dinner. What do you think, Jim? Will she come?"

Maureen held her breath waiting for Jim's response.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I do know she's single: that's one of the few things she'll admit to about her personal life."

"Are you sure she's gay?" Carol asked.

"Ninety-five percent sure," Jim nodded. "I've never asked her and she probably wouldn't answer me if I did, but yes. She's a lesbian."

Maureen frowned at his certainty. "How do you know? Does she *look* like a lesbian?"

Jim laughed. "Don't worry, Maureen. She's attractive enough. I just figured it out."

"How?"

Jim glanced at his wife covertly before speaking. "She doesn't display any awareness of men as potential mates. When she looks at me I'm just another human to her."

"Are you telling me," Carol said with wry amusement, "that you think you're so irresistible that women 'size you up' every where you go?"

Maureen grinned at Jim's discomfort.

He turned to his wife with a sigh. "Do you remember that guy in the grocery store last week? The one with the tattoos and his belly hanging out of his shirt?"

"Of course."

"And what did you say about him?"

Maureen had to bite her lip at Carol's expression. Jim was usually the loser in their lover's spats but it looked like today was different.

"I don't remember," Carol said tightly.

Jim chuckled. "You said-and I quote-'Not in a million years.' You sized him up in a single glance and rejected him out of hand as a potential mate. That's what I'm talking about. Shine doesn't do that."

"You make women sound like predators," Carol objected.

"I understand what he's saying," Maureen interjected. "Even when you're not looking, you're assessing."

"It's a reflex," Jim said. "Maybe men do it more than women. I don't know, but even if you're not interested there's a drive that makes you aware. When Shine looks at men she's not seeing them as men: they're just people. At first it made me feel defensive, but now I like it."

"Why?" Maureen was even more intrigued with the voice on her radio than she had been.

Jim scratched his chin while staring at the ceiling. "I think it's because there's no pressure. She doesn't have any expectations about me. If she likes me-and I think she does-it's because I'm likable. I don't have to be a man for her."

Carol drew her knees up and pulled an afghan over them. "What is she like around women?"

"Respectful and polite." Jim cocked his head and stared at Maureen. "Why the sudden interest?"

This was the part of asking that she had dreaded. "It's not sudden really. I've been listening to her on the radio for a long time and she has such a beautiful voice. I've always been interested, but I haven't been available." Maureen spoke as steadily as she could and tried to pretend that she wasn't blushing. Even though these two people were the dearest friends she could imagine it was hard to open up about matters of the heart. Pain was so much easier to discuss. "I know almost every lesbian in the area and I don't see anyone else appealing to me. The fact that you like her," she said directly to Jim, "carries a lot of weight with me."

He nodded absently. "I'll see what I can do. I won't make any promises, but I'll do my best."

Shine Avery looked up see Jim entering the booth. "Hey. What's up?"

"Just stopped in to say goodbye to my favorite radio personality." Jim dropped into the guest chair across the counter from Shine. "Good show today."

"Thanks."

"What are you doing this weekend? Anything exciting?"

She shrugged. "Not really. What are you going to do?"

"Just family stuff." He hesitated, then continued. "Actually..."

Shine felt her defenses go up and she waited quietly for him to get to the point.

"I'd like you to meet my family."

She smiled to take any sting out of her words. "Well, I appreciate the offer, Jim, but I..."

Jim held his hands up. "Let me finish before you turn me down, okay?"

She leaned back in her chair and bit off her words.

"I know you never socialize with any of us," he said. "I'm not sure why, but I'm hoping it's not because you think we don't want to. I was going to ask you over a long time ago, but I heard you turn down Bill's invite a couple of years back. You were real nice about it, but you were quite clear about not wanting to mix business with your personal life. I respect that," he said quickly, "but we're already pretty friendly so it's not much of a stretch. All I'm asking is an hour or so. Just long enough to have dinner with us. If you hate us I'll never ask again and I won't hold it against you."

Shine held up a hand for silence as the song came to an end and turned on her microphone. After four years as the mid-day jock, most of what she did was by rote. She considered Jim's request as she played commercials and read the weather.

Shine liked most of her co-workers, but Jim was easily her favorite and the closest thing she'd had to a friend in years. She liked his quick smile and sharp wit. She had found him to be surprisingly intuitive in spite of his California surfer boy good looks. He was watching her intently as she worked and she tried to ignore his gaze. If she was honest with herself, she *did* want to accept his offer and that desire was what made her most uncomfortable. She had spent years pushing people away and while she had achieved a measure of peace in her isolation, she wasn't particularly happy and she was frustrated by it. It occurred to her that Jim had children and she felt a tickle of anticipation. Kids were her weakness and she got along better with them than with most adults. Shine started up another song and turned off the mike.

Working quickly she put things away and arranged her next commercial break. "Will your children be there?"

"Yes." Hope flared in Jim's eyes. "It'll just be me, my wife, her foster-sister and my three kids. If you want to bring someone, too, I have no problem with that. It's just a very casual dinner and you can leave right after dessert."

A wave of nausea rolled over her and she closed her eyes to get it under control. *This is ridiculous*, she thought.

"Please?"

"All right."

"Really?"

She grinned with embarrassment at the incredulity in his voice and took a deep breath before opening her eyes. "Really. But just this once."

Jim leaned back, arms hanging loosely at his sides and a goofy grin on his face. "I can't believe it. I've been agonizing over how to ask you all week and it was easy."

"Don't make me change my mind," she said sternly.

Jim gave her his address and almost ran from the booth. Shine tucked the note in her pocket with a feeling of nausea. *I just hope I'm not making a huge mistake.*

The nausea returned as Shine lowered her forehead to rest on the steering wheel outside the address Jim had given her. She knew she was in the right place because his truck was parked in the driveway. Now that she was here she wasn't sure what she feared more-the possibility of hating them or having a good time. *Probably having a good time*, she admitted. *Maybe they won't like me and I won't have to worry about being invited back.* Over the years she had moved many times from decent places in order to avoid being friendly with good people. The urge to run was strong within her even now. *I could be packed and on the road in an hour. I could get my lawyer to have my things shipped to me as soon as I find a new place and he could put my house back on the market.* Thinking about it didn't give her the same sense of relief that it used to and she yielded herself to the inevitable. *If only I hadn't said yes.*

With a sigh of resignation she pocketed her keys and started up the walk. The door opened before she could knock and Jim smiled.

"I thought for sure you would change your mind."

"I still might," Shine shrugged.

Jim's smile was full of concern. "Come meet my family," he said as he pulled her inside.

Shine left her coat on a peg near the front door and let him introduce her to his children. Travis looked to be about 10 and was the spitting image of his father. He stood up and shook her hand like a man and she decided she liked him immediately. His strawberry blonde daughter, Angela, appeared to be on the edge of a full-blown snit.

"She's mad at me," Jim said quietly. "She wanted to spend the night at a friends house."

More concerned with Angela's 7-year-old feelings than Jim's adult ones, she looked with shock at the little girl. "Is he always this mean?"

Angela's eyes darted to her dad. "Don't answer that," Jim warned with a cock-eyed glare. Angela folded her arms with a huff, but a smile played at the corners of her mouth.

Shine turned at the sound of little feet coming into the room and saw a little boy with hair as red as a stop sign come to a halt not 5 feet away. His round blue eyes wide, he screeched and tore back down the hallway. Shine burst out laughing. "Now that's more like it."

"Travis," Jim directed, "go drag him back in here for me. That's my youngest. He's our little drama king."

Travis came back with the struggling child in his arms and set him on his feet. "Colin, say hello to Shine."

Shine raised an eyebrow at his belligerent expression. "You're short."

Colin scowled up at her. "You're a poop head."

Shine couldn't prevent her grin. "You're a little spitfire, aren't you?" The glint in his eye told her she was right.

"You must be Shine."

She turned at the woman's voice and knew immediately that this was Jim's wife. She had the red hair present in the two younger children and Shine was a little surprised to see that she appeared to be older than Jim. Still, she was an attractive woman and Shine held her hand out. "I'm guessing you're Carol."

"I've been wanting to meet you for a long time. Jim speaks very well of you."

Shine didn't know what to say to that and settled for clearing her throat. Carol still had hold of her hand and pulled her towards the kitchen.

"I want you to meet my best friend. We grew up together. Maureen?"

Shine cast a look over her shoulder at Jim and saw him lower his gaze and shuffle his feet. *Oh no...it can't be.* Her hand was dropped and she reluctantly turned her eyes as Carol directed. Everything seemed to be out of her control and she found herself looking straight into the most liquid brown eyes she'd ever seen. Time stretched for a dizzying moment as she took in what was surely one of the most stunning women on the planet. Short and curly brown hair, creamy skin, full lips and a softly rounded, deliciously proportioned figure conspired to make Shine feel like a gawky 12-year-old. She took the outstretched hand more for balance than out of courtesy and a jolt of rightness surged up her arm. For a single heartbeat Shine was transformed, then fear swept through her.

"My name is Maureen Baird," the woman said. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I hope you like fried

chicken."

Shine was numb with panic and murmured something she hoped was appropriate. She followed Jim obediently when he offered to show her his workshop. As the door closed behind her, fear was replaced by anger.

"She's the reason I'm here," she stated with far more calm than she felt.

Jim's eyes darted away contritely. "She's the excuse for inviting you, yes."

Holding her anger in was an effort. She wanted to scream at him for putting her in this position. "I feel like I've been punched in the head."

"I know," Jim sighed. "She's beautiful."

She opened her mouth to deny his words, but it was true. "That's not what I meant and you know it. I would never have agreed to come if I'd known it was a set up."

Jim sat down on a stool. "I know. I did mention she would be here, but I deliberately glossed it over. I also know that I jeopardized our friendship." His blue eyes stared at her earnestly. "She's a good woman, Shine. The best. And I hope you'll stay for dinner. If you want to leave, I'll understand and I'll smooth it over, but I hope you won't take your anger at me out on her. She doesn't deserve it."

Shine closed her eyes and slowly forced her anger down until she felt calm. *I can be charming for an hour*, she told herself. *If I focus on the kids I might even have a good time*. When she felt better she opened her eyes.

"Will you stay?" He asked.

"Yes."

Relief emanated from him. "Thank you."

Even though she was composed she still felt betrayed by him. "Don't get comfortable, Jim. If you ever give me even the slightest opportunity I'm going to shave off your eyebrows as payback." He started to laugh and she raised one of her own. His laughter came to a choking halt and she felt a measure of satisfaction.

Her only concern now was the connection she felt to Maureen. She had thought herself immune to such attractions and it was disturbing to find otherwise. The *last* thing she wanted was a girlfriend.

In much the same way she made herself seem gregarious on the air, she eased herself into a friendly demeanor as they reentered the house.

A game of Yahtzee with the kids on the coffee table kept her occupied until dinner. At their request, she ended up seated between Travis and Angela. She was grateful she hadn't been placed next to Maureen until she realized how distracting it was to sit across from her. Every time she looked up her body resonated to Maureen's presence like a tuning fork. The feeling of being 12 returned with a vengeance.

Fortunately, they were a talkative group and all she had to do was smile and laugh in the right places as they recounted amusing tales of family life. It was during dessert that she was called upon to contribute.

"Where did you live before you moved here?" Carol asked.

"Um...I traveled around a lot."

"Any place in particular?"

Shine wasn't sure her vocal cords were capable of performing. "No." All eyes were on her and she realized she would have to do better or she would make everyone uncomfortable. "All over the United States."

"Did you ever go to Florida?" Travis asked.

"Uh huh."

"Did you see a crocodile?" Angela questioned her.

"Yep."

Angela's eyes opened wide. "Were you scared?"

Shine warmed to the idea of telling the children about her adventures. "Not nearly as scared as when I saw a grizzly bear in Alaska."

Travis' voice crackled with intensity. "You saw a grizzly bear?"

She put her fork down next to the remnants of her chocolate cake and leaned in conspiratorially. "I was exploring just north of a place called Palmer and when I drove around this one corner, I almost crashed my car into him."

"What happened?" Angela breathed.

"Why, I wet my pants, of course." She said this as if it was the most natural response imaginable and the kids giggled. Speaking slowly she tried to convey what an awesome experience it had been. "He was right in front of my car and his head was bigger than Colin's whole body. His

teeth were as long as your fingers."

"What did you do?" Angela asked.

"Well, I apologized for almost hitting him with my car and asked for directions to McDonalds."

Angela snorted in disbelief. "They don't have McDonalds in Alaska."

"Sure they do." After a dramatic pause she drawled, "Well, its *called* McDonalds, but they serve Big Moose burgers, they eat their French fries frozen and the Playland is made out of ice."

"Mom?" Travis looked to his mother for confirmation.

"Don't look at me, son. I've never been there. If she says it's so, than it must be." Carol picked up a wet cloth and tackled Colin's face and hands.

"Did you see any Eskimo's?" Travis asked doubtfully.

"Of course. But I never did see an igloo. They live in houses and drive cars and watch TV just like us."

"What else?" Angela and Travis said together.

She smiled at their enthusiasm. "I saw a tornado once. That was pretty scary. I went rafting in the Grand Canyon a couple of times and I got lost in Texas once for 4 days."

"Did you almost die?" Travis looked at her seriously.

"No. But I almost got swept away in a flash flood once and I've been inside of volcanoes."

Maureen's voice crawled over her skin. "What was the most beautiful thing you saw on your travels?"

You, her body sang against her will. Using a glass of water to give herself time to think, she sorted through her memories. "Southern Utah at dawn. I slept in my truck a lot and this one particular morning I woke up after a terrible storm before the sun came up. The whole world was white with snow and the sky was overcast and it was so pretty I just had to go for a walk. When the sun came up, the sky turned pink." Just talking about it brought back the wrenching loveliness of it. "It reflected off of the snow and the clouds and for about 15 minutes it was like floating in liquid pink. It tasted like cotton candy at the county fair." With a shake of her head she thought of something else.

"I was on a road in Kentucky on a late fall afternoon once with those big old trees making a living canopy almost like a tunnel and the sun turned the air inside it into a shimmering gold."

"What did it taste like?" Maureen queried.

Shine felt foolish, but Maureen looked genuinely interested. "Taffy."

"Sounds beautiful," Jim said quietly.

"Why were you traveling?" Carol interrupted. "Was it business?"

Discomfort settled over her like a shroud. This was *precisely* why she avoided social situations. Her past was not something she was prepared to discuss. "No. I was just...traveling."

"I think it's time for all young children to go to bed," Jim said firmly.

Shine smiled at the agonized objections. She finished her cake as they were relentlessly herded away and stood to clear her place. In moments she found herself helping Maureen clean up. They worked in silence until Shine couldn't bear it any more. "What is it that you do for a living, Maureen?"

"I'm the County Librarian."

Shine blinked at the casual way it was said. "As in *the* County Librarian?"

Maureen merely shrugged as she went by.

"You don't look like a librarian."

Maureen looked over her shoulder with a grin. "What *do* I look like?"

Shine felt her social skills slip to age 11 and knew she was in way over her head. If not for the dishes in her hands she would have run for the hills. "I don't know."

Maureen smiled knowingly, then gestured at the kitchen mess. "You don't have to help me with this. I eat here pretty regularly so it's only fair I clean up now and then."

Shine's parents had been free spirits, but they believed strongly in good manners and she felt their influence now. "I'll help. What do you want me to do?"

"Wash or dry?"

As she didn't know where anything went she elected to wash. In no time at all they were done and the light conversation had kept to the task at hand. Jim came in as they finished.

"Carol will be out in a minute. Can I get you anything to drink? We don't have anything exotic," he said directly to Shine, "but we're pretty well stocked otherwise."

Maureen opened the refrigerator. "Do you still have any of the white wine we had the other day?"

"I think so. What about you, Shine?"

"I don't drink." She wanted to leave, but she felt trapped. "I'm fine." She wandered into the living room as they sorted out their drinks and settled into a chair. *I'll just stay until a moment presents itself. I don't want to be rude.*

"Did you really see a grizzly?" Maureen asked as she relaxed in the other chair.

Shine leaned back and placed a foot on her knee. "He was incredible. You just don't get the full effect when you watch them on TV. The car didn't seem like any protection at all."

"Have you traveled outside of America?"

"No." *Please don't make me talk about myself anymore.* "I made a few day trips into Canada, but not enough to feel like I spent any real time there. Did you *decide* to be a librarian or did it just happen?"

"I chose. It's the only thing I ever wanted to do. I've worked in one library or another most of my life." Maureen explained. "When I was a teenager I volunteered putting away books and reading to the smaller kids. After high school, I went to the university over in Anderson and majored in literature with a minor in library science. When I graduated, I came home and got an assistant position in the branch library over in Rawley and worked my way up. I've been in charge now for about five years."

"I'm impressed," Shine admitted. It was a prestigious position and likely fraught with responsibility. "I'll bet it's a lot of work."

"It was," Maureen grinned, "until I learned to delegate. There's still a lot to do and I'm always involved in events or projects, but it gets easier with time. I'm lucky that I've got such great employees."

Jim came in and sat down on the couch. "We've hardly seen her the last three months or so, what with her latest project."

Shine looked a question at Maureen.

"We received a grant from the Gates Foundation for computers," Maureen explained. "It's a two part project. First, we're in the process of putting the card catalog in computer format and getting all of the branches networked. Patrons will be able to see not only what we have available, but which branch currently has it."

"How many branches are there?"

"Five."

Shine swallowed the lump of intimidation in her throat. "What's the second part of the project?"

"Online computer access." Maureen's eyes lit up in excitement. "There's so much information out there and no way we can stock every book. Now patrons can go online and find the information they need or even make travel reservations. I'm thinking that we should even have classes for seniors about basic computer use."

"That's a great idea," Carol said as she sat next to Jim. "Kids learn computers in the cradle now. But older folks are intimidated by it."

"Exactly!" Maureen said.

Shine made herself small and watched the three friends discuss ideas. They were so easy with each other. She wondered how long they had been friends. During a lull in the conversation, she asked.

"I met Maureen my first day of Kindergarten," Carol smiled. "We've been friends ever since."

"We even roomed together in college," Maureen laughed. "Though I'm afraid we were a terrible example for the other girls."

"Speak for yourself!" Carol protested.

"What about you?" Shine asked Jim.

"I met Carol and Maureen on my 21st birthday in a bar." He smiled.

"*On* a bar," Carol corrected fondly. "He was adorable. And so incredibly drunk." Carol nestled under his arm. "He dropped to his knees in front of me and promised to do anything I asked if I would only let him be near me."

"She turned me down," Jim said with humor. "Can you believe that?"

"I did give you my number," Carol reminded him.

"It took me two years to convince her that younger was better."

"How old are you?" Shine wondered.

"I'm 34," Jim admitted.

"Forty-two," Carol volunteered. "And you?"

Shine could feel Maureen watching her and did her best to ignore it. "I'm 36."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Shine turned to look at Maureen's face. "You can." She felt trapped in her eyes and knew she was in trouble.

"Is 'Shine' short for something?"

"The Sixties." Shine fell back on her favorite response. People had been asking her variations of the same question all her life. The laughter helped to break the spell of intensity between her and Maureen.

"Then what's your middle name?" Carol asked.

Shine braced herself. "True."

Jim leaned forward. "Your name is Shine True?"

She nodded and everybody laughed again.

"I like it." Maureen said with a quiet smile.

Silence began to develop and Shine grabbed it hurriedly. "I should get going..."

Maureen put a hand over her heart as Jim closed the door behind Shine. "Wow." She gulped the rest of her wine and held the glass out. "I need something stronger."

A pillow hit Jim in the back. "You call that 'attractive enough'? My God, she's magnificent!" Carol was almost sputtering.

"Magnificent?" Jim shrugged his indifference and disappeared into the kitchen. He was back with clean glasses and a bottle of brandy in short order. "She's not *that* pretty," he said as he poured for them all.

Maureen blinked at him. "Come on, Jim. Can you honestly say that she's not beautiful?"

He frowned at them both. "She's way too thin. She has no breasts or hips to speak of. Her mouth is too wide, her nose is too sharp and the color of her eyes is kind of creepy. Did you see her hands?"

"She's fit and strong," Maureen argued, "and her mouth is full. She would look ridiculous with a perky nose and her eyes are the color of a pale summer sky early in the morning. Her hair is like corn silk and her hands..." her mouth dried up and she reached for her brandy, then tossed it back neatly.

Carol reached over to pat Jim's knee. "Really, honey, your standards seem a tad high. She's quite

lovely."

"Whatever." Jim followed Maureen's example and leaned over to refill both of their glasses. "She's just Shine to me. I don't see her that way."

"What did you two talk about in the shop?" Carol asked. "She seemed upset when you took her out, but she was fine when she came back in."

Jim recounted their conversation and Maureen buried her head in her hands. "Why didn't you just tell her?"

"She wouldn't have come," Jim insisted. "I didn't lie to her, I just glossed over the truth. Believe me, it was the only way."

Not wanting to dwell on what couldn't be changed, Maureen sighed. "What's done is done and you're probably right, Jim. She seemed to relax with your children, but she really doesn't like talking about herself. She seemed okay relating the things she's seen and done, but if a how or why question was asked, she hedged and changed the subject."

"I learned more about her before dinner than I've been able to glean in the whole time I've worked with her." Jim put his feet up on the coffee table and rolled his glass between his hands. "I just hope I haven't completely destroyed my friendship with her. Even if it was a tenuous thing to begin with."

Maureen reached over and gripped his calf briefly. "I hope so, too. I really appreciate that you got her over here so I could meet her."

"You're family, Maureen. Anything I can do for you, I will."

"You know," Carol speculated aloud, "if we can get her to relax, I'll bet she's a hoot. Travis has already decided that since they probably don't have cows in Alaska-it being so cold and all-moose burgers make sense."

Maureen started to giggle. "I just hope he doesn't repeat that nonsense in school." The image of it was enough to send them all into a fit of laughter.

Carol was the first to recover. "You do want to see her again, don't you?"

"Very much," Maureen admitted shyly. "But I don't think it's what she wants."

"What makes you think that?" Jim asked.

"Aside from the issue of trust?" Maureen considered her words carefully. "There was chemistry between us. Not just for me: for her, too. But every time we started to...connect, she looked...afraid. Several times I thought she was on the verge of jumping up and running away."

"But she didn't," Jim pointed out.

"So she has good manners," Maureen replied. "She's obviously not interested in a relationship."

Jim chuckled. "I forget how different men and women are sometimes."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Carol retorted.

Jim shrugged. "It's just that ninety percent of the relationships men have start just like this. You see a beautiful woman and no matter what you say to her, she thinks it's a line. Most of us spend months just trying to get a woman to eat at the same table with us. We have to *convince* women that we're worth checking out." Jim sat up and put his feet on the floor so he could lean closer to her. "How many times have you invited a woman to dinner and been rejected for no particular reason?"

"Once."

Jim shook his head. "And then what? Did you just give up?"

Maureen started to blush. "She came by a couple of days later and apologized, then asked me out."

"See?" He looked astonished. "Carol, how many times did you turn me down before you let me buy you lunch?"

Carol looked away demurely. "Four or five, I think."

"Eight!" Jim looked back to Maureen in triumph. "She is worth 10 times that many rejections to me, but you see my point, don't you?"

"Are you suggesting I stalk her?"

Jim flung himself back on the couch. "Women!" He rubbed his head and leaned in again. "Lesbian or not, she's a woman. You say she seems afraid, but she didn't run. In your shoes, I'd chase her slowly until she wants to be caught."

Maureen was at a total loss. "I wouldn't even know how to start."

Jim stood up and began to pace. "There are two important things to remember. First, don't give her a chance to indulge in anger at your persistence. Keep it short and keep it light. Second, make her anticipate the surprise of seeing you."

Shine used her back to close the door and sank down to put her head on her knees. She felt battered and emotionally drained. *Why now? Why her? What am I going to do if she calls me? I*

don't want to hurt her feelings. Why does she have to be so nice? Why did I let Jim talk me into dinner? His kids are so cute and I like his wife, but I swear I'll get him back for doing this to me. I don't know how and I don't know when, but I'll think of something.

TWO

Shine had herself calmed down by Monday morning. The previous day had been spent working on her house and yard in an attempt to distract her from starting over in a new town. She was determined to at least try to get her life back on track. She had finally achieved a measure of serenity and she wasn't prepared to have it disturbed by an impossible attraction to a woman she'd only met once.

But, every time she relaxed her guard she caught herself thinking about Maureen's big brown eyes and generous smile with a flutter of nerves. It became an irritant that wouldn't go away. In moments of personal honesty she knew that what really bothered her was that she *wanted* to see Maureen again.

Jim slunk into the booth shortly after she started her show and she managed to keep all expression from her face. "Good morning, Jim."

If he'd had a hat he'd have been twisting it in his hands. "I only came in to apologize. I know you're a private person and I lured you into a situation that was probably extremely uncomfortable for you. For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Shine waited a heartbeat for effect. "Thank you for the apology." He appeared to be waiting for forgiveness and she let him.

"Well," he spoke uncertainly. He reached into his pocket with a jerk and held out an envelope. "My wife made me promise to give you this. I don't know what it says."

Shine took it from his hand and he left the room with his head bowed. She *almost* felt sorry for him. The letter made her nervous and she avoided it for several hours. She finally couldn't stand not knowing and tore it open. A single piece of stationery was inside.

SHINE,
AFTER YOU LEFT THE OTHER NIGHT, JIM ADMITTED TO US HOW HE AMBUSHED YOU. PLEASE BELIEVE THAT WE HAD NO IDEA. I'D APOLOGIZE FOR MY HUSBAND, BUT I LIKE YOUR PLAN SO MUCH BETTER. I'D BE HONORED TO ACT AS YOUR SURROGATE. JUST SEND ME A RAZOR AND I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT. WE ENJOYED YOUR COMPANY VERY MUCH AND YOU HAVE A STANDING INVITATION TO RETURN ANYTIME. THE CHILDREN ESPECIALLY SEEM FASCINATED BY YOU. COLIN KEEPS ASKING WHEN 'CHINE' CAN COME PLAY

WITH HIM. I CAN SEE WHY JIM VALUES YOUR FRIENDSHIP SO HIGHLY.
CAROL

Oh, she's good. Shifting the blame onto Jim, offering to exact my revenge, telling me that the kids like me in hopes that it will soften me up, telling me that Jim really likes me and not a single word about Maureen. I wonder what she does for a living? Can I believe any of it? What if she's telling the truth? She set it off to one side and continued working, but her eyes kept coming back to it. *It doesn't make any difference,* she finally decided. *Yes, I really enjoyed the children and as much fun as it would be to spend time with them, Maureen is part of their lives and I'd have to deal with seeing her. I can't do it. Not to me and not to them. It's just not worth the risk.*

Having resolved to keep things the way they were she was frustrated to find that every time the request line rang, she hoped for and dreaded hearing Maureen on the other end. It was a slow and nerve jangling week, but by Friday she began to relax.

Looking forward to the weekend, Shine signed off on the log at 5:30 and ten minutes later she left the building. She turned the corner of the building into the parking lot as she dug her keys out of her pocket. Looking up, she caught sight of someone sitting on the hood of her car. She stopped long enough to see that it was Maureen, then approached with a feeling of trepidation and delight.

"Good show today," Maureen said brightly.

"Thanks." Shine stopped a short distance away. "Why are you sitting on my car?"

"Because it's locked." Maureen slid to the ground. "Would you like to go out for coffee with me?"

Shine wanted to die, or disappear. Maybe both. It was much easier to turn down a stranger. "I don't think it's a good idea." Even as she spoke she fought a desire to say yes.

"Why not?"

Shine walked around Maureen and unlocked the car door. She screwed up her courage to say, "I don't date and I'm not looking for a relationship. It's not a personal thing, it's just the way I am."

"What about friends?" Maureen grinned. "Do you allow yourself to have them?"

Shine was embarrassed. To cover her uncertainty she stuck to her guns. "I just don't think it's a good idea."

"Maybe next week then." Maureen shrugged and walked away.

"Next week?" Shine said weakly. She stood inside the car door and watched the sway of Maureen's hips until she turned the corner.

Shine was almost to her car the following Friday before she noticed Maureen. *Oh my God, she's back!* She stomped on a gleeful flutter of excitement. "What are you doing?"

"I was thinking that if we just happened to go to the same movie at the same time and just happened to sit in the same row, it wouldn't be like a date or anything." Maureen had a twinkle in her eye that made Shine distinctly uncomfortable.

"You seem like a nice woman..." Shine started.

"I *am* a nice woman," Maureen said firmly.

"...But I don't care." Shine felt a little desperate. "I'm sorry to be so blunt, but there it is. I'm content with the way my life is. I don't want to go out with anyone."

"Content?" Maureen slid off the hood of the car and Shine nervously backed up a step, her heart beating a staccato rhythm. "Is that enough for you? What about happiness?"

"Happiness is not a sustainable emotion," Shine said harshly, chagrined at her rudeness and knowing that her mother would have washed her mouth out with soap.

"Maybe you're not doing it right," Maureen grinned, "or with the right person."

"Be that as it may..."

"How long has it been since you had a friend?"

Hoping to shock her and drive her away, Shine told the truth. "Eight years."

"Then it's a good thing I came along when I did," Maureen said lightly. "Just go to the movies with me. We don't even have to talk and you can pick the movie."

"Why do you want this so bad?" Shine demanded with some heat.

Maureen glanced away, then back. "Because I'm inclined to like you and I'm short on friends. Carol is the best friend I've got and she's busy with her family most of the time. I don't have anybody to hang out with and talk to."

Shine's heart ached at Maureen's words and it took an enormous effort to continue saying no. "I can save you a lot of time and trouble by telling you that I don't make a very good friend."

"How do you know? You haven't had one in eight years. Maybe you've turned into a good friend and you don't know it."

Shine rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I would imagine people ask you out all the time."

"Most people take no for an answer," Shine sighed.

"I'm not most people." Maureen smiled and walked away.

Shine was unlocking the door of her car with shaky hands when she heard, "Hey, Shine!" She looked over her car to see Maureen at the corner of the building.

"See you next Friday!"

Shine dropped into the car and slammed the door. She wanted to cry. *I don't need friends! I don't! Especially not when they make me feel like this.*

"I don't know if I can keep doing this," Maureen said into her drink. She had called Carol from the bar after seeing Shine and poured out what happened. "I'm just making her mad and my feelings are getting hurt."

Carol put her arm around her shoulders. "Jim said it would be like this, remember? Don't give up so quickly."

"She hasn't had a friend in eight years!"

"See?" Carol squeezed her. "She's giving you personal information already. Even Jim didn't know that."

"She might be more than I can handle," she admitted reluctantly. "Maybe she's right and she's not a good friend. I'm 42 years old and I'm not sure I have the time or the energy to fix someone just so I can ask her to dinner." She caught the bartender's eye and signaled for another drink. "Do you know what she said? She said 'Happiness is not a sustainable emotion'."

"She's right."

Maureen looked at Carol in surprise. "What?"

"Well, it's not." Carol shrugged. "You can't be actively happy at every moment. I'm very happy with my life, but I'm not happy all the time."

"I guess you're right," Maureen admitted reluctantly. "I just don't want *her* to be right." She turned on her barstool to face her friend. "The thing of it is, the moment when she sees me-in that *exact* moment-I can *see* that she's glad to see me. And then she gets this...*scowl*. It feels like she's deliberately trying to hurt me."

"I can't imagine her hurting someone on purpose," Carol said with doubt. "Maybe she's trying to hurt herself."

Carol's words shot straight through the buzz Maureen was working on. Clarity was just out of reach, but her emotions sorted themselves out. "You might be right."

Shine went to work early on Monday morning. She walked straight into Jim's office and dropped into a chair. "What did you tell her?" She demanded. She had tried to alleviate her frustration over the weekend, but it had merely grown.

"Good morning, Shine," he said as he swivelled away from his workbench.

"Well?"

"Who are we talking about?"

"Maureen, of course. What did you tell her?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. What's going on?"

"Oh, please," Shine growled. "You probably know exactly what I'm talking about. She keeps ambushing me at my car, and she won't take no for an answer."

"That doesn't sound like Maureen," Jim said doubtfully. "She's never struck me as the aggressive type." He reached for his coffee. "I know she's pretty assertive at work, but she's a gentle woman in my experience."

"I'm starting to feel like I'm being stalked."

"I can think of worse things than going out with Maureen, Shine. Maybe you should just say yes and get it over with."

"I don't want a relationship, Jim."

"Why not?" Shine stood up to go and Jim grabbed her arm. "Whether you want it or not, I'm your friend, Shine. It's not dependent on you coming to dinner or going out with Maureen. I really like you and I really want to know. So tell me: why don't you want a relationship?"

Shine rubbed her hands through her hair and wondered what to say. "I'm not good at them," she finally declared.

"Sit down," Jim directed. "Do you want some coffee?"

"No! I don't want coffee!" She wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, but she feared that she was going to do one or the other very soon.

"So what do you want?"

"I want...I want to go back to before I met her: before dinner at your house. Maybe I wasn't happy, but at least I wasn't miserable." She was surprised that she had said as much as that. The only thing worse than having feelings was talking about them.

"Do you object to Maureen because you don't like her, or is it something else?"

Shine dropped her head into her hand with a sigh of resignation. "There's nothing wrong with her. She's very nice and she's very pretty."

"You're attracted to her then," Jim said with a wicked smile.

Shine squirmed on her seat. "She's beautiful, I admit that, but she's way out of my league."

"I thought you didn't have a league."

"She's a public figure!" Shine objected.

"So are you. Have you seen the latest ratings?"

His change of subject startled her. "No."

"You beat out Marty. No one's ever done that before."

"I beat the morning show?" Shine couldn't believe it.

"Actually, according to the survey, you're the most listened to jock in the county."

Shine closed her mouth with a snap and sat back thoughtfully. "Maybe I should ask for a raise."

"Now would be a good time," Jim agreed. "My point is that your job makes you a bigger public figure than Maureen."

"It's not the same. She's not just a librarian. She has a prestigious position and a lot of responsibility."

"She's just a woman, Shine. Don't let her job intimidate you."

"Well, it does."

"I think we're making progress," Jim smiled. "A few minutes ago you didn't want a relationship and now you're worried that she's too good for you."

"I'm just trying to show why it's impossible," Shine said in protest.

"You haven't said anything yet that makes me think that. You don't have to marry her," he laughed. "Just go out with her! Maybe she'll decide you aren't what she wants and then she'll leave you alone."

"You told her to pester me, didn't you?"

"I would never!" Jim sputtered.

"You did!" Shine accused. "You think this is funny, don't you?"

Jim pushed his chair back and put his cup down with a smile. "My kids want you to come over again. They liked your stories."

"Forget it," Shine grimaced. "I've got enough trouble with Maureen stalking me. I'm not giving you and your wife another chance to set me up."

"Not much chance of that. We're rooting for Maureen."

Shine peeked around the corner to see Maureen sitting on her car again. She wasn't sure if the irritation she felt was because Maureen was persistent or because she felt so much pleasure at seeing her. She backed up and went back inside to Jim's office. She grabbed a coffee can and started emptying his little drawers of nuts and bolts into it, then put the lid on the can and shook it up. Feeling better, Shine went back out to confront Maureen.

"You're not going to give up, are you?" She asked as she reached the car.

"Not without a court order," Maureen laughed. "Just go to a matinee with me tomorrow and then we'll have ice cream."

"What happened to just having coffee?"

"Every time I have to come begging the ante goes up," Maureen grinned. "If you say no this time, next week it'll be dinner."

"And after that?" Shine couldn't help but ask.

"Dancing." Maureen scooted forward to put her feet on the ground.

Shine turned and sat next to her, but far enough away that they wouldn't touch. It seemed inevitable that Maureen would get her way. "We pay our own way?"

"Yes. You can meet me at the theater and I won't even ask to share popcorn with you."

Shine took a deep breath. "I can't believe I'm going to do this."

"Does that mean yes?"

Shine nodded. Maureen patted her leg and stood up. "See how easy that was?"

"That was easy?" Shine laughed roughly. The spot Maureen had touched on her leg was tingling and she resisted the urge to rub it in front of her.

Maureen backed away with a bouncy step. "I'll meet you outside the theater at 12:30 tomorrow. Don't be late!"

Shine watched Maureen walk away and wondered if anything would ever be the same.

Shine had never seen so many different kinds of chocolate in one bowl and she had never seen any one enjoy it so much. "That much chocolate can't be good for you," she warned.

"As a member in good standing of the Deanna Troi Chocolate Fan Club, I can tell you that it's only in massive quantities that chocolate displays its truly miraculous qualities." Maureen licked her spoon. "You don't like chocolate?"

"Chocolate is like salt," Shine explained. "A little goes a long way."

"Not for me. It's a food group in my house." Maureen took another bite. "Did you like the movie?"

Shine tried to remember. It had been a romantic comedy and was already fading from her memory. "It was alright."

"That means no," Maureen smiled. "What kind of movies do you prefer?"

"Action and science fiction."

"Then why didn't you pick that space thing that was playing?"

"I've already seen it and I didn't think you would like it." Shine dug out a bite of her banana split.

"I like most everything," Maureen waved her spoon. "Except for purely horror flicks. If it's got screaming girls in high heels or chainsaws, I've got better things to do."

"I have to agree with you on that one." They ate in silence for a moment.

"What do you think?" Maureen asked.

"About what?"

"Me. Do you like me even a little?"

Shine couldn't believe how brave Maureen was. "You said you're short on friends. How come?"

Maureen looked down at her ice cream. "I allowed my last girlfriend to drive them away."

Shine kicked herself for bringing up something painful, even if she hadn't known, but Maureen's phrasing was interesting. "Why did you do that?"

Eyes still downcast, Maureen answered. "I allowed myself to be distracted by the sex and a fear of being alone. By the time I realized what was going on, it was too late. For a lot of things."

Shine wanted to know more but was afraid that an equal amount of intimacy would be required of her. She couldn't just let Maureen look so down though. "What do you do for fun?"

"Lately?" Maureen looked up with an evil grin. "Pester you mostly."

Feeling pestered, Shine rolled her eyes. "Anything else?"

"I love plants. I don't have room for a garden where I live so I stick to potted plants, but I have a lot of them. I also love to read, go to movies, concerts and plays and I like to cook. I haven't done much of it lately, not having any one to cook for. I also dabble at painting now and then, but more for meditational purposes than anything else."

"Why is it that no one ever says they're good at painting?"

Maureen laughed. "My painting skills truly are abysmal. Rather frightening actually. I put them outside at Halloween to scare the trick or treaters."

Shine smiled at Maureen. "Okay. What else do you like?"

"Shopping and swimming in the summer time. What about you? What do you like?"

She shifted nervously. "Well, I read quite a bit. I rollerblade. I like to fix things. Sometimes I like to go hiking, camping and river rafting." Shine struggled for more. "I'm a football fan in the fall. I like parachuting, too."

Maureen's eyes went wide. "Parachuting? Out of a plane?"

"You should try it," she said. It felt good to shock Maureen considering how much she had been shocking Shine of late.

"I've never even *flown* on a plane; jumping out of one is unthinkable."

"You've never been on a plane? Why not?"

Maureen shrugged. "I've never needed to go that far."

Shine couldn't tell if she was being teased or not. "I don't know whether I should believe you."

Maureen held up her right hand with a serious face. "I've never lied to you and I never will. You have my word."

Unsure what to say to that, Shine took the last bite of her ice cream and picked up a napkin to wipe her mouth. "My hands are sticky. I'll be right back." She went to the restroom and washed up, studying her face in the mirror. "I do like her," she told her reflection. "But I still don't want a relationship." She considered a moment, trying to understand the confusion of emotion inside of her. "At least I don't think I do."

When she returned to the table it had been cleaned up and Maureen was waiting by the door. Without a word they began walking back to their cars. After a few blocks Maureen spoke again.

"It sounds like you like to do a lot of physical activities. That must be how you stay in shape."

Shine patted her stomach. "I can't take credit for that. It's genetic. I've tried to gain weight, but I can't. I guess I just have a high..." She realized that she was walking by herself and turned to see where Maureen had gone. She was standing very still about 10 feet away. Shine walked over to her. "What is it?"

"I know you haven't had a friend for a very long time," Maureen said quietly, "so let me tell you something for future reference. It's very distressing for people who can't seem to lose weight to hear people say that they can't gain any."

She glanced around and saw that there was no one else within earshot. "Don't worry, no one heard me."

Maureen squared her shoulders. "*I heard you.*"

Shine started to smile, then understood. "You think *you*...?"

Maureen started walking again. "I've been fighting the same 30 pounds all my life."

"But..." Shine sputtered, "you're beautiful! When I grow up I want to look just like you." *I can't believe I said that!*

"That's very nice of you to say," Maureen said with dignity, "but I don't think I'm beautiful."

Shine couldn't even speak she was so surprised. It was another half a block before the words would come out. "Maybe you should consider changing the way you think."

Shine leaned back against her own car as Maureen unlocked her car door. "Are you still going to stalk me? Or are we square?"

Maureen slowly turned, her expression cold. "Is that why you're here? So that I'll leave you alone?"

A wave of nausea washed over Shine and she broke out in a cold sweat. "I don't feel like you're listening to me."

"What do you think I'm not hearing?"

"I don't want to be in a relationship." She spoke as clearly as she could so there would be no misunderstanding.

"I haven't asked you to be my girlfriend," Maureen said angrily. "All I want is to spend time with you and see if we can be friends. If you don't want to be my friend, say so."

"I've *been* saying so."

"You said it didn't seem like a good idea. You didn't say no."

Shine couldn't believe it. She thought she had said little else in their previous meetings. Maybe she had never actually *said* 'No' to her, but she felt she had been more than clear about not wanting to go out.

"Well?" Maureen asked. "Do you want to be friends or not?"

Confused, Shine spread her hands out. "I don't know."

Maureen got in her car and rolled down the window. "Let me know when you do."

Shine watched Maureen drive away. She stood in the March chill for a long time thinking about what she wanted.

Maureen picked at her dinner and analyzed her date with Shine. She wasn't surprised that Shine hadn't liked the movie. Neither had she-what she could recall of it. The truth of it was that she had spent the entire time aware of Shine's shoulder against her own and listening for the sound of

her breathing. The most rewarding time had been in the ice cream parlor. Shine had *almost* relaxed and Maureen had wanted it to go on forever.

What had her in a quandary now was the walk back to the car. Before she had time to think about it any further she picked up the phone and called Carol.

"Tell me," Carol said brightly. "How did it go?"

"The jury's still out. I have to ask you something."

"Okay."

She was almost too embarrassed to get it out. "Do you think I'm...pretty?"

"Pretty?" Carol burst into laughter. "Jim! Maureen wants to know if she's pretty!"

Devastated, Maureen hung up the phone and buried her head on her arms. She let the phone ring 10 times before she picked it up. Carol was still laughing.

"Pretty doesn't even *begin* to describe you," her friend emphasized without preamble. "I've known you so long that I forget sometimes how extraordinary you are."

This was what Maureen wanted to hear, but that didn't make it easy to accept.

"You are," Carol said clearly, "the *most* stunning, voluptuous, dazzling woman I've ever met. The day I leave Jim he's going to apply for a sex change on the off chance that you might be interested."

"But I'm fat," she mumbled in shame.

"Fat? You?" All laughter was gone from Carol's voice. "You *can't* be serious. You take that back, Maureen. When I grow up I want to look *just like you*."

Maureen almost laughed at her choice of words. "That's exactly what Shine said to me today."

"Excuse me?"

"Shine said I was beautiful and that she wished she looked like me. I'm having a hard time believing it."

"I've known you for 37 years and I find out after all this time that you think you're fat and you don't even know how beautiful you are and all my life I've been judging myself by how you look and coming up short?" Carol's heated exasperation poured out. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard and I can't believe..."

The phone clattered and Jim came on the line. "Some friends we are," he sighed. "I can't believe you didn't know. It never occurred to me that you needed to hear it from us." Carol was still cursing in the background.

"It's not...I mean...I know I'm *nice* looking, but..."

"Maureen, you're gorgeous. You can argue with me if you want, but you're the reason other people get plastic surgery. Just accept it and move on."

Can it really be true? Is that how people see me? "I don't know what to say."

"Maybe part of what makes you so beautiful is that you're so unaware of it. Haven't your girlfriends ever told you how lovely you are?"

"Of course, but it's one of those things you have to say. You've got to take it with a grain of salt."

"In your case, it happens to be true," he insisted. "Listen, you've really thrown Carol for a loop. She's crying now, so I'm going to let you fix it with her."

She prepared herself to work it out with Carol. "Thanks, Jim."

"Next time I see you," he promised, "I'll swoon."

Shine had a change of heart on Sunday about the mess she had made of Jim's things and went in to the station with a bag lunch to begin sorting it all out. She was down to miscellaneous bits and pieces when Jim arrived.

"Hey, Shine. What are you doing?"

"I made a mess the other day and I'm cleaning it up." She stretched and went back to work. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to go up to the translator on Cross Peak in the morning. I came in to get some tools together so I can leave from the house and save time." He pulled another stool over and sat down next to her. "What kind of mess was this exactly?"

"I dumped all these doohickeys in a can and shook them up."

"And you did this because..." Jim waited for her to fill in the blank.

"Maureen wouldn't leave me alone and I needed someone to pick on. Since it's your fault that I even met her, you were the most likely victim."

"And now you're cleaning it up. Does that mean Maureen is going to leave you alone?"

"Probably not."

"Do you *want* her to leave you alone?"

Shine stopped sorting and thought about it honestly. "Yes and no."

"It's hard not to like her, isn't it?" Jim had a big smile on his face.

"Yeah," Shine said with embarrassment.

"So, what's holding you back?"

"I have baggage, Jim."

"Every one has baggage. Even Maureen." He looked away.

"She said she lost her friends over her last relationship." Shine watched Jim's profile for clues. "It must have been pretty bad."

Jim's cheek clenched. "I prefer to think that she found out who her friends really were. And, yeah," he turned to look at her and Shine held her breath at the anger she saw there. "It was really bad."

Shine propped her chin up with her hand. "I'm sorry to hear that. It doesn't seem right that she was treated badly."

Jim rested an elbow on the corner of the table and scratched his head. "What I can't figure out is why you're so against having friends."

Shine locked gazes with him in silence.

"What happened to you, Shine?"

The desire to tell him was strong and she tried not to interfere with it. It seemed that all of his attention was focused on her and his clear, blue eyes drew her out. "Why are you assuming that I was the victim?"

If he had blinked or changed expression in any way she would have stopped there, but he genuinely seemed to care. She brushed away involuntary tears before continuing. "My last lover caught me cheating with someone else." Pain blinded her and she couldn't speak above a whisper. "She killed herself."

"Ouch." Jim put an arm across her shoulders as she cried. "I can see why you wouldn't want to talk about it."

Shine sat back and wiped at her face with the backs of her hands. Tears were still flowing freely and she knew she was waiting for his judgement of her.

"But, I bet you'll never do it again."

The tone of his voice, as well as the words themselves, made Shine start to laugh through her tears. Then Jim was laughing and Shine felt an incredible lightness flood through her.

"How long ago was that?" He asked.

"Eight years, five months and a couple of weeks."

"And you've been alone all that time?" he asked in disbelief.

"I haven't dared," she explained. "I don't want to hurt anyone again. I don't think I could handle it." Shine grabbed the cleanest rag she could find and wiped her eyes.

"Well, you sound like a good bet to me." Jim kicked her foot idly. "I agree that your cheating was bad, but suicide is not how a rational person handles it. I can't think of any reason why you should remain faithful to her memory any longer."

"I know all that. I've had a lot of time to think about it. But I can't remember how to be any other way."

"Well, now you're just feeling sorry for yourself." Jim got up and started collecting tools. "Maureen is a catch, Shine, and you're a fool if you don't at least try."

Fear lurked close by. "What if I hurt her?"

"What if she hurts you?" Jim said simply. "Just do the best you can."

Shine felt her mouth drop open in surprise. Her own guilt had been so consuming for so long that it had never occurred to her that she could be hurt as well. She let her reality adjust itself in silence.

Jim picked up his case and put a hand on her arm. "Now that you've cried on my shoulder, we're officially friends. Friends hang out for no reason. I'm going to tell the kids you'll be over for dinner Tuesday after work. Deal?"

Shine nodded dumbly.

"Bring more stories!" And he was gone.

THREE

Maureen was on the phone Wednesday afternoon clarifying budget allocations for the next quarter with a county supervisor when Carol breezed in waving a bottle of champagne. Confused and excited, she wrapped up the conversation while Carol popped the cork and poured them both a glass.

"What's the occasion?"

"Shine is interested in you," Carol said with great satisfaction.

Hope flared and Maureen beat it down with suspicion. "How do you know that? The last time I saw her I was about ready to give up."

"Jim, curse his little black heart, gave me 10 minutes notice last night that she was coming to dinner. He said he didn't want to give me time to screw it up." Carol snorted. "Apparently she cried on his shoulder last Sunday and now they're buddies."

Maureen sipped her champagne to cover the ache that started in her chest. "Why was she crying?"

"I don't know," Carol admitted. "He won't tell me and I *really* put the pressure on. All he would tell me was that every one has baggage."

Maureen thought it over. "How does that translate into Shine being interested?"

Carol leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on the desk. "I was right, you know. She's a hoot. She's far more comfortable with the kids than with Jim and I: especially when it comes to answering questions, but she has a great sense of humor. And you wouldn't believe how Colin is with her. You know how reluctant he is to cuddle. She wasn't there ten minutes and he was in her lap for the rest of the night. What kills me is that she's insulting to him and he just laps it up."

She was anxious to hear how any of the evening applied to her, but she knew from long experience that Carol would get around to it faster if she didn't push. "What does she say to him?"

"He smells; his head is shaped funny; he doesn't look very smart-all of the things I was taught you should never say to a child. She calls him *monkey butt*. I tease my children all the time, but she's brutal and he can't get enough. He cried when she left. He doesn't cry when *I* leave."

Maureen laughed at her distress.

"Did you know that she's been in every state in America? She's seen *everything* and once she got started she told all kinds of stories about the places she's been and the things she's done. Jim and

I talked about it after she left and she's got to have money. You can't do all of the things she's done without some serious finances. What I can't figure out is why she decided to stay *here*."

Jealousy that Carol should get to spend so much time with Shine prompted Maureen to ask, "What did she say about me?"

"Oh!" Carol leaned forward to put her elbows on the desk. "She was playing video games with the kids in Travis' room and they asked her if she was going to be your girlfriend."

"And what was her response?" Maureen held her breath.

"That she thought she should get to know you better first."

Maureen frowned doubtfully. "That sounds pretty innocuous."

"She blushed almost purple," Carol laughed. "The kids pounced on it like rabid dogs and teased her in that singsong kids do. 'Shine likes Maure-en! Shine likes Maure-en!' I thought she was going to have an aneurysm."

Maureen blushed a little herself. Pursuing a woman who didn't want to be caught was difficult, to say the least. But knowing that Shine might want to be pursued after all made it seem almost fun. "Well, this *is* good news."

Maureen pushed herself back on the hood of Shine's blue Lexus and crossed her legs. She felt almost sick with anticipation. Sometimes Carol overstated things. Not that she lied exactly, just that sometimes her enthusiasm ran away with her. Maureen hoped that this was not one of those times.

Shine came out right on schedule and she could see her fighting a smile. *I owe Jim really big*, she thought. Shine came to a stop right in front of her and she waited for her to speak first.

"You seem to have a thing for my ride."

Maureen ran a hand over the hood seductively and lowered her voice. "It's a really nice car."

Shine shoved her hands in her pockets and idly kicked the curb.

Maureen could see that she was stuck and only waited a moment before speaking. "I had a good time the other day. Thanks for coming with me."

Shine nodded shyly and pulled her car keys out of her pocket. She looked at them for a heartbeat, then held them out. "Maybe if I let you drive my car you'll stop sitting on it."

Delirious, Maureen snatched the keys and used the remote to unlock the doors. "Where are we

going?" she asked as Shine slid in next to her. She tried to think if she'd ever sat on leather seats before.

"You're driving," Shine said absently as she adjusted the passenger seat for legroom.

Maureen wanted to drive all night just to be this close to her, but settled for heading across town to a quiet little diner she liked. On impulse, she reached over and turned on the radio. Static blared out of the speakers and she panicked.

Shine reached over her hand and turned it down. "What kind of music do you want to hear?"

"Whatever you like," Maureen said. "I was just curious what you listen to."

"I don't." Shine fiddled with it and brought up her own station. "After work I'm kind of tired of music. I don't think I've ever used this radio before." She turned it up slowly and grinned.

"Maybe I should. It's got nice acoustics."

Maureen laughed as Shine started poking around the interior and opening the glove box. "What are you looking for?"

"I've never been a passenger in this car. It's kind of nice."

"Isn't that why you bought it?"

"I leased it." She pulled down the visor and played with the light. "They had the best lease program. It drives nice, but I don't think I ever really looked at it. How come they *always* put ashtrays in cars? Most people don't smoke."

She seemed like a little kid with a new toy and Maureen was delighted. "I don't know, but I'm pretty sure you can order this car without one."

Shine reached down and reclined her seat all the way back. "Cool. Does your seat do this?"

Maureen laughed as she changed lanes. "Now is probably not the best time to find out."

A few minutes later they arrived at the diner. The only table left was in the back by the kitchen, but neither of them cared. Maureen ordered a sesame chicken salad and Shine chose pancakes and eggs. "Do you always order breakfast at night?"

"Not always," Shine said, "but there's something about eating breakfast in the evening that's especially comforting."

Maureen couldn't resist. "And do you need comforting tonight?"

"A little, I guess." Shine ducked her head. "It's been a strange week."

"How so?"

Shine glanced up and away again. "I've been trying to be more friendly."

"That's what's different!" Maureen teased. "I thought it was your hair."

Shine shook her head in chagrin. "Sorry I was such a jerk."

Maureen thought Shine's blush was adorable. "I was a bigger jerk. Do you want to start over?"

Shine's extended her hand across the table. "Shine Avery."

Maureen took her hand. "Maureen Baird. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too." Shine took her hand back with a bashful smile.

"So, how's the friendly thing working out?"

"It's hard," Shine gave a full body sigh.

"What's so hard about it?"

Shine cocked her head with a grin. "That I like it."

They were still giggling when the waitress came with their drinks.

"Carol tells me that Colin is in love with you."

Shine ducked her head. "He *is* adorable, isn't he? Don't you love it when he snuggles up in your lap?"

"Aside from Angela, he hasn't snuggled up to anyone since he learned to walk."

Shine looked shocked. "Really?"

"Carol said he cried when you left. Do you like kids?"

"I didn't used to care one way or the other, but the last couple of years I've been wishing I were a teacher or something. I hardly ever get to play with them. I understand why it's like that," she said quickly, "but it makes it hard for people like me."

Maureen tried to make sense of Shine's words, but couldn't. "You lost me. Why it's like what?"

Shine hooked an arm over the back of her chair and played with her fork. "Solitary adults do not inspire trust in today's society-particularly the ones who want to play with your children. You have to get to know the parents first and I just don't want...*didn't*...want to do that."

"I never thought of that." Maureen couldn't imagine the kind of isolation Shine had been living that made it impossible for her to be around children. "Maybe you should consider teaching a class. You like to skate, right? You could teach that." Shine didn't respond, but Maureen could see that she was thinking about it.

Maureen surreptitiously watched Shine's hands as she drove back to the station so she could pick up her car. They were strong hands-the nails square and utilitarian, but they looked as though every spare bit of padding had been stripped away. Thinking about the long, narrow fingers on her skin made the hair stand up on Maureen's arms. She had to look away to control the craving she felt.

"I had a nice time," she finally said.

"It was okay," Shine said positively.

Maybe it's a start. "If you ever want to do something like that again, I think it would be fun."

Shine glanced over with a nod. "I think that would be...good."

Maureen quietly cleared her throat. "You know, I have to make a trip out to Rawley tomorrow to deliver some things to the branch library there. If it's not too-much/too-fast for you, I could use some company on the drive. Maybe we could have lunch. If you want to, that is."

Shine looked at her carefully and then back to the road. "You want to spend the day together?"

Maureen shrugged. "I was thinking along the lines of a couple of hours. Unless you want to go window-shopping in their Old Town district."

Shine was quiet for a long moment. "I've never been to Rawley. How far is it?"

"About 45 minutes one way. If you take the scenic route along the river it takes about an hour, but it's quite pretty."

"Maybe," Shine said slowly, "we could drive out one way and come back on the other. If that's okay with you."

Maureen wanted to sing and dance. "That would be great."

"Where should I meet you?"

"Why don't I pick you up?" Maureen suggested. "There's no sense in both cars going to the same place."

"Okay." Shine said after a moment's consideration. "I live at 1811 Riverfront. Do you know where that is?"

"I grew up here. I know where everything is," she said with a laugh. "I'll pick you up at 10?"

"Okay."

She pointed out her car and Shine pulled up behind it. "Thanks for letting me drive your car."

"Are you going to stop sitting on it?"

Maureen assessed the look on Shine's face. "I haven't decided yet. I'll see you tomorrow." She was almost to the driver's door of her Chevy when she heard Shine call her name.

"Maureen?"

"Yes?"

"We're...we're going to be just friends, right?" Her face was uncertain, her words halting. "I just...I don't have anything more to offer right now and..."

Shine was so obviously struggling to express herself without causing hurt feelings that Maureen took pity on her. She reached out slowly and put a hand on Shine's arm, stopping her voice. "If that's what you want, that's what we'll be." *For now anyway.* "Everything will be fine."

Shine visibly relaxed. Maureen patted her arm and walked away. She could feel Shine watching and it made her knees weak. As casually as she could manage, she got her car open and got in. It wasn't until she had her seatbelt on, the motor running and the headlights on that Shine gave a little wave and drove off.

"Isn't that sweet?" Maureen said aloud. "She's looking out for me already."

Shine couldn't sleep. She spent most of the night replaying her conversations with Maureen: inventing funnier, wiser, more sophisticated responses. She tried warm milk, a hot bath and soft music, but she just couldn't turn off her head. Very early in the morning she slept fitfully for nearly 3 hours, then startled awake for no reason to begin again. Frustrated, she got up and cleaned the refrigerator. The sun was just coming up when she finished so she grabbed her rollerblades and went out into the brisk March morning. She pushed herself hard, skating on the edge of her abilities and arrived home some time later with a welcome burning sensation in her hips and legs. She went straight out to the back deck, peeled off her clothing and slid into the hot tub with a groan of pleasure.

She warmed up slowly, her mind gradually clearing. When she began to nod off she went inside and made coffee. By nine she couldn't pretend that it was just another day any longer. She was half dressed in her customary jeans and T-shirt when it occurred to her that she would probably be meeting some of Maureen's employees. Concerned with not embarrassing her new friend, she

went to her closet.

Uh oh. I didn't realize how shabby my wardrobe has gotten. Except for the skirted outfit she had worn for her job interview at the station more than four years before and a pair of trousers that had looked slick on the hanger but made her look like a paratrooper, all she could find were more T-shirts, camping gear and sweats. Going through her drawers with her fingers crossed she found a pair of black denim jeans that were fairly new. With a little experimentation she decided they looked pretty good with the upper half of her interview clothes-a light blue blouse and a gray blazer.

Not bad, she thought as she studied herself in the mirror. *It might be the only decent outfit I have, but I think it works. I'll have to get some new clothes though. I don't want Maureen to think I'm a slouch. Does this make me look too skinny? My legs look like they belong on a bird. Now, Maureen would look really nice in clothes like this. I just hope I don't embarrass her in front of her staff.*

She was trying to decide whether to pull her hair back or leave it down when she heard the doorbell make a strangled thinking sort of noise. *What an awful sound! I'll have to replace that.*

"You look great!" Maureen enthused.

Shine was suddenly self-conscious. "Thanks. I didn't want to make you look bad in front of your employees."

"Don't *even* worry about that," Maureen laughed. "I love your house! It's huge!"

Uncertain of the protocols of friendship after all those years, Shine hesitated before inviting her in. For the first time she looked at her house through someone else's eyes. The front room was quite large with vaulted ceilings, hardwood floors and big windows, but held only a sofa, coffee table, floor lamp and color television over in one corner. Aside from books and magazines on the table there were no pictures on the walls or personal touches to relieve the starkness of it.

"Wow," Maureen said. "I like what you haven't done with it."

Shine flushed with embarrassment.

"No, really," Maureen soothed. "It's a beautiful room. Most people would have turned this into a decorators nightmare."

"As you can see," Shine swallowed, "over-decorating is not one of my faults."

Maureen laughed easily and wandered towards the dining room. "Is it alright if I look around a little?"

Shine nodded helplessly and followed her. She watched Maureen run her hands over the kitchen's marble counter tops and stainless Wolf oven.

"This is marvelous. You must love cooking in here. The cupboard space alone is worth its weight in gold." Maureen kept moving, only touching the surface of things-never opening anything that was closed. She stopped in the hallway and asked, "How many bedrooms do you have?"

"Four. And three and a half baths." She was reluctant to show her bedroom because it was a mess and decorated as poorly as her living room. "Do you want to see the big room? There's nothing in it, but..."

"I'd love to," Maureen interrupted.

Shine opened a door and discovered one of the regular bedrooms. "Wrong one," she said as she closed it. The next door opened on the big room. She let Maureen go in ahead of her. The room was very large and had a walk-in closet, a window seat and a door that opened out on the back deck. A fine layer of dust lay on the floor and Shine tried to remember the last time she had been in any of the spare rooms.

"Good Lord!" Maureen exclaimed from the bathroom.

Shine joined her. "I forgot how nice this is." Simply put, the bathroom was a showpiece. The whole room was done in shades of sea green and cerulean blue tile with gray marble counters, a very large shower with 2 heads and in the center of it all, a spa masquerading as a tub.

"I shudder to think what *your* bathroom looks like."

"Oh, it's nothing like this," Shine corrected. "Technically, *this* is the master bed and bath, but it's so intimidating. Mine just has a shower."

"You're not ever tempted to come in here just to soak in the tub?"

"No, I use the hot tub out back."

Maureen started to laugh.

Shine smiled curiously. "What did I say?"

"Nothing." Still chuckling, Maureen took her arm and started out of the room. "Let's go have some fun."

An hour later they pulled up to an old brick structure with a Historical Building marker next to the front door. "Is this it?" Shine asked. "It looks like a bank."

"That's what it used to be until about 30 years ago. This is where I started out after college. Wait till you see the woodwork."

Shine let Maureen hand her a box and followed her inside. Her eyes were immediately taken by the craftsmanship on display. She felt as though she had entered a cathedral. Joists, cornices and wainscoting of dark polished wood inspired reverence and Shine slowly turned in circles, trying to take it all in. The front desk appeared to be the original teller counter and she admired the baroque beauty of it. *I can't imagine getting any work done in here. It's just too magnificent to ignore.*

"Shine, this is Liz Emmett." Maureen's voice seemed sacrilegious in the cool stillness. "Liz, this is Shine Avery."

Lifting her box carefully onto the counter, she smiled at the wizened older woman with coke bottle glasses standing behind it.

"Shine Avery?" She squinted. "Well, I'll be *danged*! You're that gal from the radio, aren't you?"

"I am," Shine said shyly, reluctant to raise her voice above a whisper.

"I'm *real* pleased to meet you, Miss Shine. I listen to you *all* the time." Liz bustled out from behind the counter to shake her hand. "We *finally* get a *real* celebrity in here and Maureen has you hefting boxes like a *field* hand."

"I'm hardly a celebrity," Shine chuckled as Maureen got a hand truck out of a closet and headed back out to the car. "Is that your real name?" she heard Liz ask.

Keeping her voice low, she explained. "I was born in San Francisco in the late 60's. I was actually one of the lucky ones."

"Well, it's a *fine* name. You look *just* like I pictured you, I'll be *hung* by my toes if you ain't." Liz threw an arm around her waist and ushered her along. "No one is *ever* going to believe me when I tell them I got to meet *Miss Shine Avery* from the radio."

Shine grinned at Liz' manner of speech and determination to take her...somewhere. She spoke so quickly Shine couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"My friend Hazel is gonna *lose* her *knickers* over this, I tell you *right* now! And she doesn't even *like* that music you play. *Me?* I say it keeps you young and *randy*. Though you *could* play *some* Sinatra now and then-just for *balance*, of course. I hear tell he made a record with some of them new *young* singers. Have *you* got that record, Miss Shine? Well, no matter..."

Shine couldn't remember ever meeting anyone quite like Liz Emmett. She wanted to fall on the floor laughing, but settled for covering her mouth while Liz hunted for something in the tiny office. She looked around quickly, not wanting to miss any of Liz' antics, and wondered if this had been the vault in some distant past.

"Here it is!" Liz crowed as she held up a Polaroid camera. "Hazel *Smarty-Pants* Whitaker will

have to believe *this*, I'm telling you. You just stand *right* there and let me figure this out."

Normally, Shine would have run like her hair was on fire at the mere mention of having her picture taken, but Liz was just so extraordinary she couldn't object. She finally gave in to the giggles after the photo was taken. She was bent over a desk signing the candid shot when Maureen came in and inspiration struck.

"Will you take a picture of us?" She asked. Maureen nodded and Shine reached over the desk to pick up a blank piece of paper. In big, thick letters she wrote 'My #1 Fan' on it and added an arrow. Liz was momentarily speechless as Shine posed with her and the hastily made-up sign. She took the photo from Maureen and held it out to Liz with a grin. "Show *that* to Hazel Smarty-Pants Whitaker."

Liz was silent for a heartbeat and then threw her hands up with a cackle. "You're a *pistol*, you are! This is going to blow out the *elastic* in her *panties*, I'm telling you *right* now!"

Shine hardly noticed that Maureen had taken her hand and was leading her slowly to the front door. Liz was still cackling in high good humor about the state of Hazel's wardrobe as the door closed between them and Shine finally gave in to her hysteria.

She was wiping tears away with both hands, her sides aching, when Maureen parked the car next to an art gallery. "Is she always like that?"

Maureen was laughing, too. "She sure is. What you did with the picture was really sweet."

"Ah," she sighed in sweet relief. "I've never signed an autograph before, but she was just so funny. I had to do it."

"I'm surprised you don't get asked to do it more often."

"I don't know why anybody would want it. It's not like I'm famous or anything."

"I've heard people repeat things you've said in line at the grocery store. You're more popular than you know."

"God! I hope not."

Maureen laughed again. "This is where we start walking. There's a soup and salad place at the other end of this street where I thought we could eat. Walking up and back allows us to explore the shops on both sides of the street."

"It's kind of quaint," Shine said with pleasure.

"I'm sure you've seen a lot more interesting places."

"After a while it all starts to look the same," she shrugged. "But I haven't really been anywhere

for years, so this
looks like fun."

Laughing over Liz had opened something up deep inside of her and she felt particularly carefree. The feeling was addictive and she abandoned herself to it.

Maureen learned quite a bit about Shine just by paying attention to the things that caught her eye. She didn't seem to like anything abstract and she appeared to prefer simple, clean, honest lines. She wanted a picture to be recognizable and in the correct colors. She wasn't interested in textile arts at all, but in woodcraft, grain seemed to carry more weight than style or purpose. In pottery and ceramics she admired rounded shapes and harmonious coloring.

She wondered why Shine's home was so barren when her taste in decor was so interesting. She had been shocked at how sterile the house had been. What was the point of living in such an extravagantly lavish home if you weren't going to *live* there? She didn't even use the master bedroom for heaven's sake!

She was looking at beaded necklaces in a crowded little shop when she heard Shine talking.

"Well, aren't you a pretty girl! Come here, baby. Come on!"

Maureen turned to see her calling to a life-size statue of an Airedale sitting with its head cocked to one side.

"Don't be afraid," Shine coaxed.

"Shine?" It was all she could do not to scream with laughter. Other customers were watching now and not all of them understood what was happening.

"Something's wrong with this dog," Shine frowned.

Maureen hissed. "It's not real."

"Of course she is." Shine reached out to pet it and jumped back in astonishment. "She's dead!"

Maureen burst out laughing with the other customers. Shine cautiously approached again and slowly figured out that it was only a statue. Maureen gasped for breath as Shine petted and stroked it.

"You need a bath, don't you girl?" Shine crooned. "You're covered in dust." She crouched down and picked up the heavy figurine in a hug.

Maureen's laughter ceased at the child-like expression of hope and need on Shine's face. A tidal wave of affection rolled over her.

"Can my dog ride in your car?"

"Of course." She reached out and caressed the stiff curls with a smile. "Does she have a name?"

Shine didn't even hesitate. "Mabel."

She knew it was only a statue, but she felt a completely irrational craving to have it sitting next to her instead of locked in Maureen's car. She didn't mind at all that she had made a fool of herself; in fact, it amused her to no end that she had been so thoroughly duped. Shine had never owned a dog, but had always wanted one. Her father's allergies had prevented them from having *any* pets during her childhood. If she had known even the first thing about how to take care of a dog she might have gotten one years ago, but in light of the recent realization that she wasn't taking very good care of *herself*, Mabel seemed like the best place to start.

"You're thinking about the dog, aren't you?"

Shine hid her eyes behind her hand at Maureen's question. "I know it's stupid, but I love that dog."

"It's not stupid," Maureen said warmly. "It's adorable."

Shine picked at her salad. "Have you ever had a dog?"

"We had an Irish Setter when I was a kid. She was beautiful and sweet, but only about as smart as a dust bunny. Daddy said he named her Skitters because her thoughts skittered around like drops of water on a hot skillet."

The imagery was so clear Shine laughed out loud. "That's pretty funny. Does your family still live around here?"

"I'm an orphan," Maureen said casually. "My entire family died in a house fire when I was 14."

Shine's belly turned over and landed somewhere between her feet. *"I'm so sorry, Maureen. I never would have asked if I'd known."*

"No, no! It's okay." Maureen looked distressed. "It all happened so long ago that I forget how it sounds. I still wish they were here, but I'm done grieving for them. Please, don't feel bad for me."

Shine put a hand over the ache in her chest. "That must have been really awful for you."

"It was pretty hard," she admitted. "I was spending the night at Carol's house when it happened. Her family took me in afterwards and I was very lucky to have them. What about you? Where's

your family?"

Shine focused on relaxing through her fear of emotional closeness. "My father died of a heart attack when I was 17 and my mother died of a stroke 4 and a half years ago."

Maureen clucked sympathetically. "I'm sorry to hear that. Do you have any other family?"

"I have a cousin from my dad's side, but I haven't seen her in over 20 years. We were really close." Shine remembered Grace with heartache. "I still miss her."

"I know how hard it is to be alone," Maureen said softly. "When your mom died, was that why you moved here?"

Shine was uncomfortable with having the sequence of her life known, but while it was a difficult topic, it didn't touch on the core of her pain. "I just happened to be here when I found out she was dead. I flew down to take care of her and when I came back I couldn't think of any place else to go." She remembered those days with reluctance. "There didn't seem to be any point to going on so I decided to stay until I felt like traveling again."

"We're both orphans then. That's something we share."

"It's kind of a depressing thing to have in common." Shine observed dryly.

"Granted." Maureen pushed her empty plate to the side and rested her chin in a hand. "Did you go to college?"

Shine squirmed and answered anyway. "I went to UCLA."

"What did you study?"

Shine considered carefully. "If I tell you, you have to promise not to tell."

"Why?"

"Because I lied on my job application at the station."

"Why did you lie?"

"I was afraid they would say I was over qualified and not hire me." Shine began to enjoy the surprise she expected Maureen to feel and waited for her to ask again.

"Don't make me beg, Shine."

"I'm an electrical engineer."

Maureen's eyes opened wide. "You're a what?"

Shine folded her arms on the table with a smile. "I started out studying physics. I had it in my head that physicists knew how everything worked, but I discovered along the way that physicists are born, not made. It's not something you *become*-it's something you discover that you *are*. People not born with the gift can pass the courses and get the degree, but they'll never really be more than engineers with attitudes. I didn't want to be like that, so I decided to be practical and studied electricity."

Maureen had a very satisfying look of shock. "Why are you working as a disc jockey?"

"I was bored and it sounded fun. I wanted something that was low pressure while I figured out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. The irony is that I turned out to have a knack for it and I really enjoy it."

"But what about your education?"

"I can't lose it, Maureen. It's up here," she tapped her temple. "I keep up on what's happening in my field and if I happen to find something I want to do with it, I'll do it." Shine bent back over her lunch and began eating again.

"Does Jim know this?"

Shine shook her head and swallowed quickly. "Please don't tell him."

"Why not?"

Shine thought it over. "Habit mostly, but I don't want him to think I've been lying to him."

"Okay," Maureen conceded reluctantly. "I won't tell him, but keeping it secret may give me a rash."

After lunch, Shine followed Maureen in and out of shops. It was hard to pay attention now to all of the things on display. She pretended to examine some Christmas ornaments so that Maureen wouldn't feel she was being rushed.

"What does Carol do for a living?"

"She's a guidance counselor at the high school," Maureen answered absently. She had her nose in bath scents and held out a bottle of shower gel. "Do you like this one?"

Shine took it and smelled. "It's alright."

"That means no," Maureen smiled. "What kind of scents *do* you like?"

"I, uh..." she paused uncertainly. "Most of this stuff is a mystery to me. I've never really been

into girl things."

"Soap is a girl thing?"

"*Shower gel* is a girl thing. Soap is normal."

"Funny," Maureen grinned. "You don't look butch."

Shine had to laugh. "I haven't heard that term in a long time."

"Do you think of yourself as butch?"

"No," Shine said slowly. "I think I'm something else."

Before they even got to the highway, Shine fell asleep in the passenger seat. Maureen drove as smoothly as she could manage; slowing down for corners and braking long before it was necessary; watching her sleep out of the corner of her eye with aching tenderness. *She looks so defenseless and gentle. I could wake up to that face and be happy.*

Maureen remembered the first time she had waited outside the station to ask Shine on a date. *She's come a long way already. She would hardly speak to me at first. Now she's sharing secrets with me and falling asleep while I drive. I don't know if I should feel hopeful for more or be grateful for this much. I wish I knew what hurt her so badly. From the way she talks and acts, her 'traveling' must have begun after whatever it was. It's not the death of her mother that's causing her so much pain, though that couldn't have helped her. It wasn't her dad's death either because she went to college after that. She did say that she hadn't had a friend in 8 years, so if I use that as the starting point something happened to her at 27 or 28.*

I remember my twenties. It wasn't till my 30's that I realized how dreadful it all was. I had just enough wit to keep myself alive and not enough sense to know what was in my best interest. It must have been the same for her. I think it's a pretty universal experience. Unfortunately, whatever happened seems to have made her believe that solitude was in her best interest.

She glanced over as Shine shifted position with a sigh. *Eight years without a friend presumably means without a lover as well. I can't even imagine what that's like. Nine months is making me twitchy-eight years is incomprehensible.*

Maureen drove slowly through town and into Shine's upscale neighborhood. She eased to a stop in front of her house and turned off the car. Shine continued to doze and Maureen took the opportunity to commit her delicate features to memory. With the gentlest of touches she caressed Shine's long blond hair, savoring the fine whisper of it across her fingertips.

When she could no longer justify her delay as considerate, Maureen rested her hand on Shine's shoulder and softly said her name. Shine's eyes opened instantly.

"Where are we?"

"Your house."

Shine looked around in sleepy confusion and stretched as much as the confines of the car would allow. "I fell asleep."

"I know. You must have needed it."

Shine nodded. "I didn't get to see the way home."

"Maybe I could show it to you another time." Shine's lazy smile siphoned away all of her strength. *I could die happy right now.* Maureen caught her breath as Shine got out of the car and opened the back door to retrieve her dog.

Shine stopped, half in the car and half out, the statue in her arms. "I had a good time. Thanks for everything."

"Anytime, Shine. Anytime."

FOUR

The TV was on, but Shine was oblivious to it. She lay sprawled in her favorite chair, one hand resting on Mabel's infinitely patient head, her mind sifting carefully through the debris of her life for remnants of direction and hope. It was obvious to her after spending the afternoon in Maureen's company that the life she had made for herself was deficient. She wondered if a person could actually die of emptiness; and if one could, how close had *she* come to the point of no return?

Now that she'd had a taste of friendship-first with Jim, then Maureen-she didn't want to give them up. She thought of Carol and the children with hopes that she could count them amongst her new friends as well. It seemed like plenty to start with.

But she just couldn't think clearly about the idea of a lover. After eight and a half years, sex just didn't seem necessary anymore. She remembered loving it and knew her body was capable of loving it again, but she didn't miss it. From where she stood now it just seemed complicating. Life could get spooky very fast if you started sleeping with someone. As soon as you made love all kinds of responsibilities and expectations came into play.

Shine admitted to herself that her most secret and furtive longing had always been to find someone she could spend the rest of her life with: a woman who was honest, reliable and playful. But, at the same time, she was terrified of actually finding her. She had come to this point in her life precisely because she was avoiding any relationship that might introduce her to something more intimate. How she would handle that if it happened she wasn't sure. She didn't have to worry about Jim's family for the obvious reasons. Fortunately, she and Maureen had already agreed to be just friends. She would just have to be careful about any new women she met.

Shine remembered most of her childhood with deep pleasure. As an only child she had enjoyed the focused attention of both her parents. Her father had been what was now commonly known as a computer geek. He was tall, blond and handsome: his body razor thin as a result of his allergies, of which there were many. Computer programming was his specialty and he was aflame with the possibilities creative minds could achieve in his field. Shine wished that her father had lived to see the incredible progress that had already been made. Many times in the past 19 years a new product or program had been released into the market that she clearly remembered her father predicting. She and her mother had laughed at him at the time, but he had been right. She still believed that he had known every interesting thing there was to know about science and what it could be used to accomplish.

Her mother had been a teacher for developmentally disabled children. As a teacher she had been personally involved with all aspects of Shine's own education. Technically speaking she was not a pretty woman, but with humor and patience to spare, she was transformed into a person who was regarded with the deepest admiration and affection by all who knew her. Shine had inherited her nose, her flawless skin and her robust good health. The rest came from her father.

His unexpected death in her senior year of high school had been devastating not only for them both as individuals, but for their relationship. Without his calm presence to give them perspective, they turned on each other in their grief and it was with anguished relief that Shine had gone away to college. They healed their bond over a period of years, but that time in her life was emotionally unstable.

Fortunately for them both, her father had left not one, but two, generous life insurance policies, a nice home in an affluent neighborhood and a comprehensive portfolio of stocks in the burgeoning computer industry. Even without the partial academic scholarship she had won, Shine's financial future was secure if she exercised prudence.

Shine had always known that she was a lesbian. She didn't have a word for it until she was 13, but even as a small child she had known that she would choose girls over boys. As freethinking products of the sixties, her parents had gradually come to support her propensities. It wasn't that she didn't like men. Shine often preferred men in social situations because they were far less complicated and easy to be around. In matters of the heart, however, only a woman would do.

As a teenager her forays into the sexual arena were generally confusing and occasionally

damaging. But when she arrived at UCLA, everything changed. On the surface, her sexual identity was of no importance to anyone-everyone was religiously practicing tolerance. In reality, it gave her instant access to interesting groups and people. Because she was a lesbian it was assumed that she was already 'in'.

With her relationship with her mother in temporary shreds, Shine frenetically threw herself into every group and activity she could find to fill the gap. She met Regina in a self-defense class for women.

Reggie was a natural beauty with a strong need to hide any trace of her feminine side. This created a paradox, which she handled by living on an emotional edge. She burned so fast and so bright that Shine fell onto her like a black hole in search of nourishment. That kind of emotional turbulence was outside of Shine's life experience and she interpreted it as love at its most passionate.

She and Reggie lived in an apartment off campus, charming in its rickety old age, for Shine's first three years of school. They were tempestuous, impulsive and inconsiderate with each other, but they were also a core couple and provided an entertaining and educational haven for others. When Reggie, a year older than Shine, graduated with a degree in business it all fell apart. As students they had the same problems and pressures. With Reggie learning that the world wasn't like University, they discovered that their primary bond was sexual and it wasn't enough.

Senior year Shine changed her major and worked like a machine to meet the requirements. She dated occasionally, had sex infrequently, and graduated in the top ten percent of her class. Exhausted and still emotionally drained over Reggie, she went home and learned to enjoy her mother as an individual. At the end of summer she decided to take her sheepskin out for a spin to see what it could do.

She came to understand very quickly what Reggie had been going through. Employers were impressed with her diploma and education, but as a young (strike one) woman (strike two) with no job experience (strike three) she couldn't find the kind of work she had expected to have handed to her. The real world turned out to be far more complicated than she had been willing to believe.

She finally accepted a very junior research and development position in a mid-size company that made testing equipment for microchips. In addition to designing small parts of a larger puzzle, they encouraged her to learn basic machinist's skills as well as mechanical and electrical assembly. During her four years with them she became their most flexible employee. With her all-around skills, she was sent out on some of the most difficult service calls. She could find the problem and fix it as well as adapt the machine's design and function to the specific task or environment for which it was needed.

On the romantic front, she had fallen in love with an Assistant District Attorney. Leah was 11 years older and reminded Shine of her father with her love of logic and reason. She was quiet and composed with none of Reggie's flamboyant emotional outbursts or tantrums. Making love with Leah was not as wild or fierce, but in many ways it was better. Shine learned to appreciate

passion as an on-going form of expression rather than as an event.

The only problem Shine could see in their relationship was that Leah insisted they keep separate living arrangements. She never explained why she felt this was necessary, it just was. Shine grew tired of it quickly and it became a bone of contention between them. Leah would not discuss a compromise and Shine eventually couldn't maintain her feelings without a commitment. Their breakup was prolonged and agonizing for them both with neither really understanding the other's position.

Not long afterwards, Shine spotted an ad in a trade journal for a small new company that needed an engineer to fine tune their product and develop new ones. On a whim, Shine applied for it and her newly acquired mechanical skills turned out to be exactly what they were looking for. The company might have been small and the product may not have been very exciting (small motors to run medical devices), but Shine felt like the captain of her own ship.

One of her responsibilities was to work closely with the assemblers for the purpose of making the motors easier and faster to build without compromising safety or durability. The challenge of it was exciting and some days she couldn't wait to get to work.

Over time she struck up a casual friendship with an assembler her age named Debra. Together, they were the sum total of the company's les/bi/gay employees and it was just natural for them to become friends. For months they were lunch buddies. Debra was in a relationship and Shine was mentally consumed with her work.

Everything changed so quickly that it was still hard for Shine to identify the sequence of events. Debra's relationship was suddenly over and she was frantically looking for a place to live. Shine's second bedroom popped into her mind and before she had time to consider it she had offered it to Debra. The moment when she could have taken it back passed before she could gain control of her tongue. Unable to back out of it, Shine bowed to the inevitable. They got on well enough at work and Shine assumed that as busy as she was they would live *around* each other and not with.

Two days later she had a roommate. At first, Shine adjusted to it by hiding in her room to study mechanical texts and journals. Over the next several weeks, however, she discovered that Debra was very easy to live with. She was clean, quiet and sweet. Shine began to spend more time with her.

Coming home very late one night after visiting her mother, Shine heard Debra crying in her room. It wasn't in Shine to ignore another person's pain and she went in to offer comfort. It gradually turned into passion and Shine found herself in a relationship by morning. Not wanting to hurt Debra's feelings, Shine went along with it. Knowing she had no one to blame but herself, she made the best of it. Debra was so loving and flexible about Shine's needs that Shine felt obligated to try harder. She was careful not to say that she loved her and never made any promises about the future, but she became increasingly unhappy.

Part of what made it so difficult for Shine was that her company had a zero tolerance policy for

romantic entanglements between co-workers. Not only had she allowed her personal life to get out of control; her job was at risk. She just couldn't see a way clear without hurting Debra or losing her job. She began drinking to numb herself to her plight.

On their last night together, Debra had talked Shine into going dancing at a local club. The promise of alcohol and booming music was just what Shine thought she needed. She started drinking hard and fast. The lights, the beautiful women and her own misery motivated her to let things get out of control. One particular woman in a skin-tight blue dress drew her attention and they surreptitiously eyed one another.

At some point, Shine made her way to the restroom and the woman in blue followed her. Without a clue, even now, as to exactly how it happened, Shine ended up in the stall with her. The sex was swift, savage and satisfying. The absurdity of it struck her and she was laughing when they opened the stall door.

Debra was standing on the other side of it, tears streaming down her face and all Shine could think to say was "Oops!" This made her laugh even harder. Debra ran.

Knowing she had done exactly what she had been trying to avoid, Shine drank herself into oblivion. Scattered images were all she retained of the rest of that night. She woke up in the local jail having been arrested for public drunkenness, disturbing the peace and vandalism. The police report stated that she had been found staggering down a residential street, screaming at the top of her lungs, "It's not my fault!" and breaking car antennas as she passed.

Having never been in trouble before and represented by her family's lawyer, she was released with a stiff fine and generous restitution. She counted herself as very lucky. Arriving home by cab in the late afternoon, Shine's life changed forever.

She started screaming the instant she found Debra's suicidal carnage and couldn't stop. Neighbors called the police and Shine was sedated as soon as paramedics arrived. When she was released from the hospital later that night her mother had come to take her home. She curled up in her childhood bed and cried. She wouldn't eat and nightmares sent her screaming out of sleep every night. Her mother and their lawyer protected her as much as possible. Having been in lock up at the time of Debra's death, Shine was legally absolved of any involvement. She wasn't surprised when she lost her job; she had expected it. Her mother had gone to the apartment and collected Shine's personal effects.

Shine donated the rest of her belongings to Goodwill and lay in her bedroom nursing her guilt for over a month. Her mother finally broke through the apathy by threatening to have her committed and Shine forced herself to start eating and taking walks, but the nightmares continued. While her physical health improved, her mental state became more precarious. With her mother's approval she tried sleeping pills, but they just made it impossible to wake from the dreams.

One night, out of frustration, she got into her car and started driving. Two hundred miles later she checked into a motel and had her first undisturbed sleep since Debra's suicide. The next day she drove home, but the nightmares came back. She got it into her head that if she kept moving

the dreams wouldn't be able to find her. She packed some clothes and started traveling.

Staying in motels was hard on her finances, so after several weeks she traded her car in for a pick-up. She added a camper shell and threw some foam rubber in the bed and thereafter she slept in the truck. She followed good weather and parked in campgrounds as often as possible.

The backroads of America became her neighborhood. Every Monday night she called her mother so she wouldn't worry and as the first Christmas rolled around, she flew home for a few days. The nightmares came back immediately and it was with relief that she went back to her truck. Her mother seemed to think she was on the American version of the Australian walkabout. Once she promised to stay away from motorcycles and body piercing her mother was very supportive.

She was at a county fair somewhere in Arkansas after more than a year of traveling when she realized that she no longer felt anything at all. To prove to herself that she *could* feel if she wanted to, she bungee-jumped from a platform 150 feet in the air. The feelings it evoked were so intense she sat down on the pavement and laughed until she cried.

After that, the focus of her traveling changed. Instead of moving for the sake of moving she began to seek out new experiences. She dabbled in scuba diving, horseback riding, river rafting, parasailing, water skiing, parachuting, kayaking, rock climbing, more bungee jumping, snow boarding, hang gliding and surfing. She didn't care for scuba diving. It was beautiful, but too sedate for her taste unless there were sharks nearby and even in her desperation that just sounded stupid. She also discovered much to her surprise, that she was afraid of horses. And some things (like water skiing, surfing and snow boarding) she never quite got the hang of. They required a greater degree of skill and practice and she never stayed anywhere long enough to acquire those things. Her favorite things were rafting and parachuting.

It was during this period that she took up rollerblading. Part of the attraction to it was that she could do it anywhere and it didn't take up much space in the truck. She tried to do all the tricks she saw the teenagers doing and was actually getting the hang of it, but a broken arm and bruised hip in Virginia reminded her that she was almost thirty. She contented herself with flawless footwork and speed.

Her daredevil ways had begun to settle and, though she had not yet admitted it, she was getting tired of traveling when she stopped at the Hidden Valley Resort just north of Edgewater. She did her laundry, serviced the truck and skated around town for several days. On Monday night she called her mother at the appointed time and learned of her death. She cried most of the night, packed up her things and drove to the landing strip just south of town. She found a man who would fly her to Southern California for a terrific amount of money. She left her truck in the parking lot and gave the keys to the head mechanic in case it had to be moved while she was gone.

Arriving home and arranging the funeral and wake was surreal. Her mother had left specific instructions and all Shine had to do was go down the list and make sure each thing was taken care of, but it was the hardest thing she had ever done. In spite of spending so much time alone, she had never *felt* alone before. In the back of her mind there was always a place where she could

go with someone who cared for her. All of that was gone now.

Having put it off for most of a week, her mother's attorney finally cornered her in her childhood home and read her the will. Everything came to her as she expected it would. But everything turned out to be great deal more than she had known about. Her mother had turned out to be a gifted investor. Using the money and stocks left by Shine's father she had accumulated a net worth, including the house, of just under 8 million dollars. With what was left of her own inheritance added in, Shine now had over 9 million. It made her feel more alone than ever because she could not buy what she wanted the most-her family.

With nothing left to tie her to the place she had grown up, Shine put the house on the market. She hired a financial advisor named Roger Bingham on the advice of her attorney and they slowly hammered out what to do with all of the money. It was an interesting experience for Shine.

A third of the money was set aside to finance Shine's life and it continued to grow slowly. She had dipped into that money three times since living in Edgewater. She bought and furnished her house, built a playground in the poorer section of town and paid for one little girl's kidney transplant. The last two things she had done anonymously with Roger's assistance.

Roger took the rest and invested it. He sent her quarterly reports, but she only skimmed them. The bottom line was always higher than the last report she had received so she left him to his own judgement.

When everything was taken care of, Shine flew back to Edgewater and checked into the Motel 6 for a good night's sleep. The following morning she packed up the truck and prepared to move on. She couldn't even decide which way to turn out of the parking lot. She sat in the cab of the truck for over an hour with the motor running.

If you don't have anywhere to go, she thought, then staying where you are until you figure it out is the smartest move. She rented a studio apartment 2 days later and began shopping for a house. After moving in to the four-bedroom house and buying a minimum of furniture and kitchen stuff, she got bored and went looking for a job.

Shine wiped at her eyes and got up to make something for her dinner. Knowing how she had gotten here was one thing. Knowing how to get to a better place was another matter entirely, especially if you weren't sure where, and how far, you wanted to go. Sandwich in hand she wandered through her house and tried to decide what to do with it. Having Maureen see it like this had been embarrassing and she was determined not to feel that again. The room that spoke to her first was the master bedroom. She didn't know if she would be comfortable sleeping in it, but there was no reason why she couldn't put a bed in there.

She went to sleep early in anticipation of all the shopping she would have to do the next day. Mabel's curious expression watched over her from beside the bed as she slumbered.

She shopped for clothes first. It had been years since she had splurged like this and in no time at all she had more than she could carry. Stashing the bags in the trunk of her car she headed back inside the mall with shoes on her mind.

"Chine! Chine!"

She turned in surprise just in time to catch Colin as he hurled himself at her legs. "Hey, monkey butt! How are you?" She swung him up in her arms and hugged him as hard as she dared. His little arms wrapped tightly around her neck and it felt so good she was reluctant to let go.

"Hi, Shine." Angela stood next to her with a shy grin on her face and Shine leaned over to include her.

"I love your hair," she said. "It's very pretty and it makes you look smart."

"Thank you," Angela said primly. "Mommy's over there."

Shine looked up to see Carol walking towards them with a shopping cart. "Look what I found," she called to her.

"Finder's keeper's," Carol laughed. "What are you doing here?"

"It's come to my attention that my wardrobe leaves something to be desired. I've been buying clothes."

"It doesn't look like you've had much success. Do you need help?"

Shine gestured to the parking lot. "The first load is in the car. Now I'm after shoes, lunch and a new bed."

Colin squealed. "I hungry! I wanna Happy Meal."

Angela didn't say anything, but the look she turned on her mother spoke volumes.

"*After* we do our shopping," Carol reminded. "That was the deal."

Shine nervously cleared her throat. "I'll feed them while you shop if you like."

Carol looked at her steadily. "Are you sure?"

Colin was bouncing up and down on her hip and Angela oozed hope. "Yeah. It'll be fun."

Carol jumped on her offer and tried to give her some money, but Shine waved it off. "Colin loves ketchup," Carol instructed, "but he won't eat it. He just likes to play with it. And no caffeine for

either of them." Shine assured her that she would follow the rules and Carol gratefully walked away.

Alone with the children, Shine couldn't help the grin. "Where's Travis?"

"He's helping daddy on the mountain," Angela said. "Do we get to eat now?"

Shine ordered three Happy Meals and thoroughly enjoyed the meal. They played with the little toys that came in the boxes and built cabins out of their French fries. She laughed at their jokes because it made them feel good and told them about Mabel. After they ate, she let them go into the Playland and waved at their antics.

Carol joined her sometime later. "How's it going?"

"Thanks for letting me play with your kids. They're great."

"They sure have taken a 'Shine' to you," Carol quipped. "Travis will be disappointed that he missed this."

"Did you finish your shopping?"

"In half the time, thanks to you. Keeping track of Colin and curbing Angela's spending fancies is a full time job."

"I can only imagine."

"So," Carol said, "you're shopping for a new bed?"

"Well, I've got an empty bedroom and it's kind of in the way of an experiment. If I like how it turns out I may start using it."

"Where do you sleep now?" Carol looked confused.

Shine adjusted herself awkwardly. "I sleep in one of the smaller rooms. It's the master bedroom I'm going to work on."

Carol nodded as if it all made sense. "Do you have a plan or are you looking for ideas?"

"Looking for ideas," Shine admitted.

"Well, it sounds like fun. If you just can't figure out what to do, you should talk to Maureen. She's really good at decorating. I know you two had dinner on Friday night. I'm sure she'd be glad to give you some advice."

Shine nodded, surprised that she didn't seem to know about the trip to Rawley. "I'll keep that in mind."

Carol collected her children and Shine hugged them goodbye. Focused now on her house she went in search of furniture.

FIVE

Shine had a grin on her face. She couldn't help it. The station manager, Bill Nichols, had announced the ratings earlier at the regular Friday morning staff meeting and her co-workers had been in and out of the booth all day with congratulations. She had already thanked Jim twice for telling her in advance.

Hats, T-shirts and good quality jackets with the station logo on them had been handed out to everyone "to make you all more visible". Carlos, the week night jock, had made a joke about cheap, self-sustaining organic billboards that made everyone laugh.

The request line rang and Shine picked it up absently.

"Magic 95, this is Shine."

"Hi! It's Maureen."

Shine looked around to make sure no one could see her blush, then felt stupid because she was alone in the booth. She ducked her chin into her shoulder and started picking at a piece of tape stuck to the counter. "Are you going to be waiting on my car again?"

"I can't today, I'm sorry."

Shine covered her disappointment with cheerfulness. "That's okay."

"I have a planning meeting at 6 or I would. That's why I called. And to ask if you have any plans tomorrow."

"Well, no. I don't."

"I have an errand to do tomorrow and I was hoping you would come with me and then we can go to lunch."

"Another delivery?"

"No. This one is personal. I usually take Carol, but she hates it."

"Do I have to lift things?"

"No," Maureen laughed. "Nothing like that."

It wouldn't matter if I did. "Okay."

"I'll pick you up at noon?"

"See you then."

Maureen pulled up to a storage unit and turned off the engine. "There's a set of keys in the glove box. Would you get them?" She got out of the car and Shine joined her at the unit's door. Taking the keys, Maureen opened the padlock and Shine helped her push the heavy door up.

"What's all this?"

"My ex-girlfriend's things." The storage unit held a few pieces of furniture, quite a few boxes and a Monte Carlo. It had taken all week for Maureen to decide to invite Shine on this chore. She was dreading the whole thing for several reasons.

"I don't understand," Shine said. "What's the errand?"

"I come out every month and start the car so it doesn't get clogged up."

Shine turned to her with a puzzled expression. "Why do you have to do this? Where is she that she can't do it herself?"

"County jail." Maureen opened the car door and slid into the seat. She started the engine and revved the motor a few times to make sure it would stay running, then got out, closed the door and stepped outside. Shine followed her with a grim expression. Leaning back against her own car, she waited for the inevitable questions, but they didn't come. Shine stood in front of her patiently waiting for answers.

"Her name is Beth," Maureen started. "It's hard for me to talk about this because it's embarrassing."

Shine's voice was quiet and hard. "Jim didn't tell me what happened, but he said it was very bad."

"It was." Maureen took a deep breath. "It's a long story, but the nuts and bolts of it is that when I tried to break up with her she beat me up." She saw Shine stiffen. "I'm all better now, don't worry about that."

"How bad?"

"Does it matter?" Maureen hated talking about her injuries. It always sounded more like bragging than it should.

"No," Shine said. "But I'll always wonder and eventually I'll go behind your back and find out for myself."

Maureen had to smile. There were any number of people who would be happy to tell Shine what they knew. Not all of them had her best interests at heart. "The worst was this," she held out her left hand. "Do you see it?"

Shine leaned closer to get a good look. "These three fingers look kind of bent."

Beth had repeatedly stomped on her hand. The worst damage had been to the middle, ring and little fingers. That they only looked bent was a small miracle assisted by two surgeons. Maureen flexed her hand easily for Shine, though it had not always been so. She still had to do daily exercises to strengthen it and maintain its flexibility. "She broke them. They were a real mess, but they work fine now."

Shine's voice was small. "Do they hurt?"

"Only when it's really cold." Maureen shrugged it off. "I'm getting older anyway and aches and pains will soon be a fact of life. I just got an early start."

Shine dashed a tear from her eye with the back of her hand. "What else?"

Maureen spoke quickly to get it over with. "Concussion, three cracked ribs and quite a bit of soft tissue damage."

"Do you mean bruising?"

"Extensively," Maureen admitted. "I was pretty lucky actually. If she had been any stronger I might be dead."

She watched Shine struggle for a moment, not just emotionally, but physically. To her surprise, the taller woman lurched forward and gave her an awkward hug, then quickly stepped back. "I'm glad you're not dead."

That gesture meant the world to Maureen. "Me, too."

Shine's arm swept back to point at the car. Her demeanor was suddenly brisk and angry. "Will you tell me why in the hell you're taking care of her stuff?"

"Several reasons." Maureen patted the side of her car and Shine obediently sat next to her. "Beth was a bad choice. I think I always knew that, but I ignored it. For that reason I have to accept

partial responsibility."

"You think you deserved it?" Shock and outrage warred on Shine's features and she surged to her feet.

"No!" Maureen corrected. "I *didn't* deserve it. But I ignored the signs. If you willingly bend over and pull your pants down, you can't call it rape." She held her hand up to forestall Shine speaking. "I put myself in harm's way so I can't say that it was unexpected. Beth is very controlling. I chose to see it as butch at the time and allowed myself to become attracted to it. We were together almost 18 months and over that time I let her make all the rules in our relationship. My friends gradually drifted away and it wasn't until the end that I found out that she was going behind my back and telling them lies. Carol was the one who finally came to me and told me that Beth had told her and Jim that I spoke ill of them in private. Lucky for me they knew it was a lie, but it made me look at Beth more clearly. She controlled where I went, what I did and whom I did it with. And I realized that she did it because I let her. So I changed the rules. Beth didn't like that. So I told her it was over and asked her to leave."

"And she beat you up." Shine looked furious.

"Yes, but I need you to understand that I helped create the situation that made it possible. Do you see that?"

Shine's face blanched and she looked away, all trace of anger gone. "I understand perfectly."

Maureen was puzzled at the transformation. "Do you really?"

Shine nodded and looked back into her face. "Yes. What are the other reasons?"

Maureen folded her arms protectively in front of her. "She didn't have anybody else to take care of her things. She would have lost everything. But the biggest reason," she explained, "is that I'm hoping that if I behave in a civilized manner, she will, too." Shine raised her eyebrows and Maureen laughed. "I know. I tried to be civilized once before and ended up in the hospital." Maureen slowly reached out and put her hand on Shine's arm. "But I have to try."

Shine folded her arms and sighed. "You're a better woman than I am, Maureen. I would have sold what I could and trashed the rest."

"Why do you think you're here?"

Shine burst out laughing. "You brought me to keep you civilized?"

"Sort of."

Shine shook her head. "When does she get out of jail?"

"September. They gave her 15 months on a plea bargain."

"Is that all?" Shine asked with surprise.

"A year for what she did to me and 90 days for assault on a police officer. She was a little upset when they arrested her."

"Still," Shine protested. "She got off lightly."

"I didn't have to go to court and it didn't get splashed all over the papers. That was my biggest concern."

"Good point," Shine nodded. She casually moved to sit next to Maureen again. "Why does it embarrass you to talk about it?"

"Well," Maureen admitted with chagrin, "it doesn't fit the image I have of myself. What does it say about me that I can manage over 40 employees, an army of volunteers and a multimillion dollar budget, but I allow my girlfriend to run my life and beat me up?"

"I see what you mean," Shine said sympathetically. "Too bad they don't teach relationships in college. Jobs are easy in comparison."

"Love 101," Maureen suggested to lighten the mood.

Shine came back with, "Sexual History."

"Romance Languages."

"Sex Lab Partners."

Maureen started to giggle. "Romantic Encounter Groups."

Shine grinned. "Pheromones: Love is in the Air."

"Bodies in Motion: An Astronomical Perspective."

"I took that class," Shine said with a snicker. "It wasn't about what I thought it was about."

"The same with Women's Studies," Maureen teased. They both had a good laugh and she decided they'd been there long enough. "Do you want to hang out for a while?" She asked hopefully as they locked the unit's door.

Shine looked thoughtful. "What do you want to do?"

Maureen struggled to appear as casual as possible. "I don't know."

Shine didn't say anything until they were in the car. "Maybe we could catch a movie."

Shine became Maureen's Saturday friend. They went to movies occasionally, ate lunches regularly and stopped at yard sales. Spring was in fine form and as it warmed up they started taking walks along the river or down Main Street. Shine was still cautious about sharing information, but she did talk more about her childhood. Maureen began to get a sense of who Shine had been and what she could become.

Shine talked frequently about her cousin, Grace, and how close they had been, but she stayed away from how they had become separated. She seemed willing to talk about everything good in her life, but reluctant to mention anything bad as though once started everything would come pouring out and Maureen wouldn't be comfortable with her anymore.

Maureen's attraction strengthened and she carefully watched Shine for any sign that her affections might be returned. Sometimes she could feel Shine assessing her and hoped that she was at least thinking about the possibility.

In the middle of May she called Jim and asked him to meet her for lunch. They sat on a bench at the park with sandwiches and spoke of trivial matters while she worked up her courage.

Jim successfully launched his sandwich wrapper at a garbage can and put his arm around her shoulders. "I assume we're here to talk about Shine."

She sighed deeply. "I think I'm in love with her, Jim."

"I thought so," he said quietly.

She wrapped up the remains of her lunch and set it aside. "Am I making a mistake? Is she capable of loving me back?"

"I think so, yes," he said with confidence. "Maybe you don't see her the way we do at the station, but she's not the same person she used to be. She's changed."

"Changed how?"

"She seeks people out and asks them how they're doing. She brings do-nuts on Tuesday mornings. People are still unsure how to handle such a radical change in personality, but she's persistent about it, I've got to give her that."

Maureen went to the heart of her concern. "Am I safe, Jim?"

He sat quietly, staring off into the park.

"She confided in you, didn't she? That's why she cried on your shoulder?"

"I can't tell you without her permission. You know that."

"I know, and I'm not asking," she reassured him. "I just need to know if I'm safe."

"I only know the bare bones of it, Maureen," he said after some thought. "It's impossible for me to be sure, but I feel pretty confident that she would rather die than hurt anyone. Whether or not she's capable of loving you, I just don't know; but I think that with a little more time and maybe a touch of pressure at the right moment you'll find out."

"Thanks, Jim."

"Maybe you should let us invite both of you over at the same time."

"I think she likes feeling that your family is separate from me. I'm not sure how I know that, but I don't think she wants to share yet."

"Carol tells me that you take Shine with you now to check Beth's car. How's that going?"

"Fine. She doesn't like it, but she's a lot easier with it than Carol."

"Shine didn't have to sit with you in the hospital," he pointed out. "Carol still thinks of Beth as a rabid dog that needs to be put down."

"I know. Ever since my family died she's tried to look out for me."

"She really does think of you as part of her family, you know. So do I."

She looked into Jim's familiar, loving face. "Do I ever tell you that I love you, Jim?"

"In a hundred different ways," he grinned. "Now, are you coming to our BBQ on Memorial Day Sunday?"

"Wouldn't miss it. What do I get to bring this year?"

"Chips for 12. I'm going to ask Shine to bring dip so you might want to talk to her about it."

"Do I sense some sort of plan?"

"Hey," Jim held his hands up. "I'm just the messenger."

The library stayed open till 8 on Wednesdays and Maureen usually worked the front desk for the last 2 hours. She felt it important to keep a hand in with checking out books and answering questions. It was too easy to lose sight of what her work was all about if all she ever did was

paperwork.

The Wednesday before Memorial Day was no exception. With summer coming on the library was especially busy. She was just finishing up with a patron when she happened to look up as Shine walked through the lobby. Their eyes met and Maureen felt as though she had been stripped naked. Her mouth dried up and her knees shook. *How does she do that?* She wondered.

Shine sauntered past with a mysterious smile and Maureen was called back to work by the next patron. But no matter what her hands did, Maureen's single thought was that Shine was near. Maybe even watching her. Every move, every word and smile took on a special significance. She allowed herself to fantasize about kissing Shine in the stacks. This proved to be a mistake.

Shine laid the novel she had chosen on the counter in front of Maureen. "How do I get a library card?" Maureen seemed flushed and her hands were shaking. "Are you okay?"

Maureen cleared her throat. "Must be low blood sugar."

"Can I get you something?"

"It'll pass." Maureen handed over a small form and a pen with a weak smile. "Fill this out and I'll issue a card for you."

Shine scooted to one side at Maureen's direction. She bent to fill in address and phone number as Maureen checked out another patron. When she was done, Shine handed her the form. No one else was in line so she leaned over the counter to watch Maureen enter the information in her computer. "Do you need to see ID or anything?"

"Normally, yes. But I know you."

Maureen smelled like raspberries and cream. "It's okay that I came, isn't it?"

"Definitely," Maureen smiled. "I don't think I've ever seen you in here before."

"I was bored and I got to thinking that you listen to me on the radio but I've never seen your work. It seemed only fair."

Maureen looked over her shoulder at a clock. "We close in 20 minutes. Why don't you hang around and I'll give you a tour."

"If your blood sugar is low you should eat."

"Okay. So I'll give you a quick tour and then we can get something to eat. Is that okay with you?"

Shine had already eaten, but she wanted to spend time with Maureen. "Sounds good." In minutes Shine had a new library card. "I haven't had one of these since I was a kid."

"Don't lose it," Maureen threatened, "or I'll have to charge you a dollar to replace it."

Shine picked up her book with a happy smile. She sat down to read but couldn't concentrate past the first page. Giving up, she watched Maureen checking people out and straightening the counter. Coming had been a spur of the moment decision, but she was glad she had. Sometimes, waiting for Saturday to see Maureen was almost painful.

Soon enough they were alone. She followed Maureen through a quick tour; surprised at all of the things she was shown. When she had been small, libraries were for books. Now they had videos, computers, books on tape, music CD's and an entire corner devoted to teaching people how to read.

"Your job is a little intimidating," Shine told her.

"And yours isn't?"

"I don't just mean the work. You're *The County Librarian*. That's not just a job. It's a position in the community."

"Do you see me as a public figure?"

Shine wondered at the tone of Maureen's voice. She wasn't sure if she had offended or not. "Sometimes, yes."

"I see you the same way. The difference is that people know your name."

Shine blinked in surprise. "All I do is sit in a little room and talk to myself."

"And at any given moment there are 10 or 20 thousand people listening to you. *That* intimidates *me*."

"More like 8 or 9," Shine said with acute embarrassment. "I think you would change your mind if you ever saw what I do."

"Is that an invitation?"

Shine thought quickly. "You're closed on Monday for the holiday, right?"

"Yes."

"Then come watch my show."

"Are you sure it's okay?"

"Positive. It'll be fun." Shine desperately wanted her to say yes. Other jocks had visitors on a regular basis. The weekend morning jock, Janie, always brought her eight-year-old daughter. Carlie knew how to do everything, including reading the meters. Shine was all for letting Carlie have her own hour-long show on Saturday morning.

"What should I wear?"

Shine laughed aloud. "It's radio, Maureen. You could wear pajamas and no one would know."

"Oh, right."

Shine had her arms full of dips and chips, so Maureen rang the doorbell. Carol pulled the door open. "Maureen! Shine! Come on in!"

Music was blaring on the radio and Shine could hear people laughing in the back yard. She carried her precarious load to the kitchen and searched for a place to put it all. "Let me help with that," Carol said.

Shine had spent Saturday afternoon making dips. Ranch and onion were the standards, but Shine felt creative. She also made artichoke, bean, clam and spinach dips each in their own container and neatly labeled. She was feeling pretty proud of herself.

Maureen and Carol took over in the kitchen and she felt a little left out so she wandered out to the back yard. She knew Jim and his kids and also Janie and Carlie, who she had not expected to see, but there were several more people she had never met. Jim grabbed her and introduced her to them.

Carl Macklin was tall, rough looking and appeared to be several beers into a really good time. A detective on the police force, he had been friends with Maureen and Carol back in high school. His 12-year-old son, Andrew, was a miniature version of his dad but with the sweetness of youth still in his face.

Joe and Faith Ackerman were a couple Jim and Shine's age. Joe was Jim's fishing buddy and they had two tow-headed kids: Tommy, 9, and Catherine, 8.

Grabbing a soda, Shine drifted to the kids playing Marco Polo in the yard. "Hey, guys. Can I play, too?"

"New guy's IT!" Angela screamed.

Shine closed her eyes, spun quickly three times and the game was on. She loved playing with children and so rarely had the opportunity that this was a real treat. Having a group of kids, different ages and genders, was like a dream come true.

When they tired of Marco Polo, Shine asked if they wanted to do something *really* fun. As she knew they would, they all agreed. Shine quietly told Jim she wanted to show the kids something in her car and they'd be right back. No one seemed to be paying any attention, which was exactly what she had hoped for. She led them through the side gate and to the trunk of her car. Shine had gone out early on the spur of the moment and gotten water pistols and the kids were delighted. They filled them at a spigot by the front porch. Inspired by the mud that quickly developed, Shine gave herself commando stripes on her face and the children creatively followed suit.

Dividing the children into two groups headed by Travis and Andrew, Shine got them positioned at both side gates. The attack on the unsuspecting adults went beautifully. Shine could hardly call Retreat she was laughing so hard at the mayhem. They regrouped in the front yard to plan a second assault, still congratulating themselves, and the sprinkler system went off. Shine's army scattered to the winds.

Having been crouched over one of the hidden sprinklers to talk, Shine had received a thorough soaking. She herded the all kids into the back yard to surrender and Jim tossed her a towel.

"Are you having a good time?" He asked with a laugh at her condition.

"You have no idea." She grinned. She toweled her hair and wiped her face then tossed the towel back at him.

"I need something to drink." She stepped inside and Maureen burst out laughing at her.

Puzzled, she let Maureen take her hand and lead her down the hall to the bathroom. Mud was smeared all over her reflection. She was shouldered aside and Maureen wet a washrag. Shine held still while Maureen cleaned her face gently. Her heart raced. She knew that she should stop her, but couldn't think why. It felt so good to be this close to her. Not to mention Maureen's hand holding her chin and touching her face. While Maureen looked for mud, Shine looked at her. Such clear, beautiful skin and those eyes! Shine knew she could spend hours looking at those eyes and they would never look less lovely. She looked at Maureen's full lips and had the urge to kiss them.

"You look happy," Maureen said quietly.

The realization that she *was* happy almost knocked her off her feet with its intensity and tears rolled down her cheeks. Unable to run, Shine did the unthinkable. She lowered her head to Maureen's shoulder. Arms came around her to hold her tight and Shine gave herself to them.

"It's okay, Shine," Maureen said in her ear. "I've got all day."

Shine wrapped her arms around Maureen. She felt so *right* in the circle of Maureen's arms. The way she fit and moved and even smelled. Shine was warmed from the inside out. She relaxed into Maureen for as long as she felt she would be welcome and then eased her hold. Lifting her head, she let Maureen wipe away her tears.

"Do you need a minute alone before going back out there?" Maureen asked gently.

"Please?" Maureen left, closing the door behind her. *We're just friends*, Shine thought sternly. *Just friends*. The words only made her feel sad.

Maureen's feet didn't touch the ground. She went back through the kitchen and smiled secretly at Carol's raised eyebrow. Taking a beer out of the cooler by the porch door, she went outside and sat on the edge of the deck. The cold bite of the beer brought temporary tears to her eyes. She could still feel Shine's lean body against her own and thought it amazing that she wasn't glowing with pleasure. She had been sure that Shine was thinking about kissing her.

"Aunt Maureen?"

Maureen looked down into Colin's sweet face. "What is it, Colin?"

"Can Chine still play wif us?"

"Of course, honey, but I think she needs a break. She's pretty old, you know."

"Yeah," he said dejectedly.

"I bet she'll be ready after she eats something."

"Can we eat now?" He asked hopefully.

"You'll have to ask your dad."

"Kay!" He yelled and ran off.

Maureen smiled after him and took another long pull on her bottle. Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back and enjoyed the feel of the sun on her face. She was aware of when Shine sat down next to her and opened her eyes. "Better?"

"Much. Thanks for letting me..." Shine paused, "you know."

Maureen swayed towards her and bumped shoulders. "That's what friends are for." Shine bumped her back with a shy smile.

SIX

Maureen parked as close as she could to the side door of the radio station. She grabbed the lunch basket she had prepared and hoped that no one was watching as she ran for the door. Per Shine's instructions she looked through the glass at a sign inside that said ON AIR.

"Just my luck," she said aloud when she saw that it was bright red. She looked down the street to see if anyone was coming. Seeing it was clear she checked the sign again. After a few seconds the red light went out and she banged on the door. She waited a full minute before Shine appeared on the other side of the glass and burst out laughing.

"Let me in!" Maureen called through the glass. She jumped inside as soon as the door opened. "I hope no one saw me."

Shine was bent over with one hand on the wall and the other on her knee, helpless with laughter. Unable to contain her own pleasure at a joke well played, Maureen laughed along with her.

"Feet!" Shine choked out and began staggering down the hall. She looked back over her shoulder and looked Maureen up and down. "Where did you get those?"

Maureen had gone online and ordered her full body pink fuzzy pajamas, feet included, first thing last Thursday morning. She had paid extra to have them delivered by FedEx to the library on Friday. "I stole them off some kid." Maureen had been rehearsing this line all weekend and was pleased to see that it worked as well as she hoped.

"They're great!"

"Not so great when you have to go to the bathroom," she said running the zipper down to her cleavage and back up. She had practiced this, too. "Don't you have to play commercials or something?"

"I've got a minute. Come on, I'll show you the break room."

Maureen was given a cursory tour of the break room, bathroom and office before being led to 'the booth'. Shine pointed to a desk chair and small desk area in the corner and Maureen gingerly made her way to it. Setting the basket on the floor at her feet, she sat down and tried to make sense of the room.

Maureen couldn't remember ever seeing a room so full of electronic equipment in her life. She recognized reel to reel tape machines, and even an old turntable. The console she was sitting next to looked rather like pictures of those in recording studios, if not quite as complex. She was surprised to see a tall, revolving rack of what looked like 8-track tapes.

"I thought those were dead," she pointed.

Shine pulled one out at random and handed it to her. "It's called a cart. Looks like 8-track but it's a different kind of animal. We put commercials on them."

Maureen studied the 'cart'. Black on one side and clear on the other, she could see the tape inside and how it was threaded back upon itself. She handed it back and Shine shelved it.

Shine sat down in the office chair in front of the console and began shuffling carts and papers. "I've only got two rules. First, if I hold up my hand or even a finger, freeze and don't make any noise. Second rule; don't touch anything until I show you how to use it. Okay?"

"You're the boss." Maureen looked around again. "I expected it to be louder in here. I can hardly hear the music."

Shine turned a knob on the console and the music came up loud, then was turned down. She reached over the counter towards her and pulled some headphones off a hook. "These are for you to wear." She plugged them in and showed her how to adjust the volume. Picking up her own headphones, Shine put them on her temples.

"Aren't you supposed to put them on your ears?" Maureen asked.

"Do I tell you how to do your job?" Shine grinned.

Maureen opened her mouth to respond and Shine lifted a finger. Maureen almost swallowed her tongue in her haste to be quiet. There was a brief flurry of activity and then Shine was talking into the microphone. Hearing and seeing Shine on the radio at the same time was temporarily mind-boggling. Shine's eyes and hands were in constant motion and what she was doing didn't appear to have anything to do with what she was saying.

How does she keep track of what she's doing? Shine looked over at her and smiled as a commercial played in her ears. Maureen watched her slowly lift a finger up to her chin and push up. She was uncertain what Shine was trying to tell her, then realized that her mouth was hanging open. She closed it with a snap and Shine nodded. The fact that Shine wasn't mocking about it took away any embarrassment she might have felt.

She watched Shine's face as she finished the break and started another song. She didn't understand how everything was done, but the smoothness with which it was accomplished was a reflection of Shine's demeanor. She wasn't tentative or uncertain in any way. Her body was relaxed and her movements efficient and confident. Maureen's mental picture of Shine underwent a radical shift.

For the most part, she still thought of Shine as a wounded and frightened animal but she realized that she had been seeing only a part of the picture. Here was a woman of strength and poise: a woman to be respected and valued. She didn't sound good on the radio by accident. She was a professional and she was in her element here. A wave of longing flooded Maureen and she closed her eyes in an effort to contain it.

"You can talk now."

Maureen opened her eyes and took off her headphones. "I'm not sure what I expected, but I'm pretty sure that wasn't it."

Shine smiled and reorganized carts. "It's not as intimidating as it looks. When it stops being scary to you I'll show you how to do some things."

"I'd rather not."

"Let's see how you feel in an hour," Shine said with confidence. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Sure."

Shine leaned over and Maureen could hear a click.

"I'll be right back. No matter what happens, don't touch anything."

"I promise." Shine left the booth and Maureen studied the rest of the room. The wall behind her had charts and slogans that she had heard on the radio too many times to count. There was a map of Edgewater and a color-coded pie chart with time notations. Behind her there was a window into another room that looked like a smaller version of the booth. The wall behind where Shine sat was floor to ceiling with thin white boxes arranged by some sort of letter and number system. Glancing at the reel to reel tape machines, Maureen puzzled out that the white boxes were more tapes. CD's covered another wall.

Feeling a little overloaded Maureen put on her headphones and turned up the music. She wasn't good at naming the artists of songs, but she was pretty sure that these were the Backstreet Boys. She had heard this song enough times that she almost had the lyrics down. She closed her eyes and nodded her head to the rhythm. The song wound down and she looked around to see if Shine was back.

Remembering Shine's 'no matter what' she waited to see what would happen. Just as she started to feel panicky, another tape machine started up and the songs smoothly changed. Sarah MacLaughlin replaced the Backstreet Boys and she smiled in relief.

Shine came back moments later with coffee. "Thanks for not panicking."

"Oh, I panicked plenty," Maureen laughed. Coffee and creamer were placed in front of her. "You have no idea how bad I need this."

Shine turned off whatever it was she had turned on earlier and sat down. "So what do you think?"

"I'm trying not to."

"Can I play something for you?"

Maureen doctored her coffee and thought about it. "Do you have Eric Clapton's *Change the World*?"

"I sure do."

Maureen nodded and Shine rolled her chair around to the CD section. She pulled it out almost immediately and rolled back to the console. "Contrary to what people think," Shine said as she loaded it into a CD player and consulted the play list on the case, "radio doesn't pay squat. Unless you're syndicated or in a huge metropolitan area, of course. Being a disc jockey only has one perk, but it's a big one."

"What's that?"

Shine stood and rolled her chair under the counter. "The music. Come here."

Maureen walked around the equipment and stood next to Shine.

"See this button here?" Shine placed her finger on it. "I want you to push this when I tell you."

"No, Shine, I can't." Maureen tried to back up, but Shine's arm came up against her back. She looked into Shine's eyes and tried not to faint.

"Trust me."

Maureen leaned forward and put her finger over the button. She could hear the song ending and she waited anxiously for Shine to direct her.

"Now," Shine finally said and Maureen stabbed at the button. Shine leaned over the console and turned a knob bringing the opening guitar up loudly. Music, pure and sweet, poured out of speakers set high in the corners of the room.

"Oh my," Maureen breathed as it rolled over her. By the chorus she was singing and swaying along with the music. The words came from straight out of her heart and she sang them with all of the pent-up longing she felt for Shine. The luxury of being able to say what she felt almost liquefied her bones. Maureen became nothing but love for Shine. Just before it ended, Shine stepped forward to put a car in a machine and turned the sound down. A jingle played and Shine pulled her chair out to sit down. Unable to even conceive of not doing it, Maureen placed a hand on Shine's shoulder. "I can see why you would love that."

Shine put on her headphones and held up her hand. Maureen stayed just as she was as Shine talked into the mike. During the commercials, Maureen used both hands to gently massage Shine's shoulders. She knew she was taking advantage and didn't care. Not taking the chance would hurt as bad as Shine objecting to it. She couldn't tell if Shine was okay with it or not. She seemed as sure of herself as she had at the last break. When the mike was finally turned off, Maureen prepared for the worst only to have Shine drop her chin and relax.

Maureen's heart thudded painfully and she moved her hands under Shine's hair to work over her neck. The feel of her smooth skin made her dizzy with passion. Not wanting Shine to be the one to end it, Maureen ruffled her hair and stepped back. Shine slowly turned and looked at her with an unreadable expression.

"Was that out of line?" Maureen asked.

"It was...nice."

"Good." Maureen said with secret relief. "Teach me something."

The time flew by for Shine. She'd never had a guest before and found that she liked it. She would have liked to interview Maureen on the air about the library, but sensed that Maureen wasn't ready for it. Shine had also never had a pupil before and was surprised how quickly Maureen picked things up. Once she relaxed, she had picked up the timing of the machines and was making one smooth segue after another. Maureen brought her chair around and commercial breaks became a joint effort. Shine controlled the microphone and Maureen did everything else at her direction.

Carlos showed up for his shift at 5:20 and Shine had a good laugh at Maureen's expense. She seemed to have forgotten that she was wearing pajamas that made her look like a bunny and Carlos found it quite amusing. After her last break, Shine rolled both chairs out of the way so Carlos could get his wheelchair into the booth and turned it over to him.

"We never ate lunch," Maureen said as Shine picked up her jacket. "Do you want to come over to my place and help me eat it?"

Shine got an idea. "Can we go to my place instead?"

"Sure."

Shine drove with a mind to Maureen's car in her rearview mirror. At home, she put on some music and they sat on the couch to eat. Maureen could hardly stop talking about being on the radio. Shine let her babble on, enjoying her enthusiasm. When the eating was over, Shine went to the bathroom and came back with two lush, over-sized towels and picked up Mabel.

"I have something to show you," she said. "Follow me." It was just starting to get dark and Shine led the way out to the back deck. Tossing the towels on the bench and setting Mabel off to one side, Shine kicked off her shoes and started the jets in the hot tub.

"You said it was a hot tub!" Maureen gasped. "It's a Roman bath!"

Shine almost laughed at how quickly Maureen got out of her pajamas and into the water. She

took off her own clothes as Maureen berated her.

"I'll bet you can do laps in this thing! This is the biggest spa I've ever seen. What else are you hiding in this house of yours?"

"I'll show you later."

Maureen lay back with a deep sigh. "This is heaven."

Shine eased into the tub and sat across from her. "Sometimes I spend whole evenings out here."

"Thank you, Shine." Maureen's eyes didn't even bother to open. "Not just for this. Working with you was fun. I had a great day."

"Me, too."

Shine stayed in the tub till she got dizzy. She got out and sat on the edge of the tub, wrapped herself in her towel and watched Maureen. *She is so beautiful*, she thought. *I thought my heart was going to stop when she was singing that song today*. Her hands began to itch and she scratched them idly. *I wish my breasts looked like hers*. Shine's own breasts barely filled her hands and she had always been disappointed in them. Maureen's were full and round without being heavy. Shine searched for the right words to describe them. *They look... happy*.

"Who?" Maureen asked.

Shine felt like a deer caught in the headlights. "What?" she croaked.

"Who looks happy?"

Shine couldn't help but look again and Maureen's eyes followed hers.

"My breasts?" Maureen asked in surprise.

Shine wanted to die. She covered her face with a groan.

Maureen laughed. "That's probably the best compliment I've ever had, even if you didn't mean to say it."

"I'm so embarrassed," Shine moaned. It didn't help that Maureen was still laughing.

"Shine, look at me."

"I can't." She heard Maureen get out of the tub and a moment later was sitting beside her.

"Please."

Shine peeked and saw that Maureen was wrapped in her towel. She sat up straight but couldn't look into her face.

"I've had such a good time. Don't ruin it now by being embarrassed. I'm not."

"I didn't mean anything by it, you know."

"I know," Maureen looked away for a moment. "Can I ask you something? We've known each other for almost four months, but we rarely see each other except on weekends. Don't you ever want to spend more time together?"

"Sure!" Shine said in surprise. "I just assumed that you were too busy to get together more often."

"I'm never too busy to see you," Maureen said sincerely. "It's not enough for me to only be your weekend friend."

"You can come over or call me whenever you like. I don't really do anything except work. I've done more fun things in the last four months than I did in the last four years."

"Is that a good thing?"

Shine put a hand to the ache in her chest. Habit tried to stop her from saying what she really felt and she fought it. "I'm never going back, Maureen. I don't think I can live like that any more."

"How is it different now?"

Tears welled up and she wiped at them with the corner of her towel. "I don't think I can describe it. Everything seems brighter and more colorful. I can smell things. I feel more alive than I ever felt before. I can *breathe*." She laughed at herself shortly. "I know it sounds melodramatic to say it out loud, but I think I was dying. Not metaphorically; *for real*."

Maureen took her hand and held it. "I'm glad you didn't."

They sat in the dark holding hands and listening to the bubbling of the water for some time.

"Hey," Shine said suddenly. "Do you want to see what I've done with the master bedroom?"

Using the door that opened onto the deck for the first time, Shine led her inside and turned on the light. She had found a wrought iron king-size bed that she thought Maureen would approve of and added oak nightstands, dressers and cabinets. Except for the lack of linens and decorations, it was starting to look like a real bedroom.

Maureen ran her hands over the frame. "This is a beautiful bed and the furniture is perfect. You *do* have good taste."

Shine was almost giddy with her approval. "I'm just not sure what to do next."

"What are your favorite colors?"

"Blues, greens and purples."

Maureen walked around the room and looked at it from different angles. "First you need area rugs so your feet won't get cold in the morning. You also need a chest or a bench that you could sit on. Then you need bedside lamps and art. After that it's a matter of slowly adding things that look good to you."

"Would you help me?" Maureen's smile was all the 'Yes' she needed.

Maureen sat on the park bench, rolling her feet back and forth while Shine put her own skates on. She felt foolish with all of the pads on her knees and elbows and even more so with the helmet. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this," she said to Shine. "I feel like I'm in costume."

"You do look kind of silly," Shine grinned.

Maureen pushed at Shine's shoulder and was rewarded with a giggle. "Why don't you skate a little first," she suggested. "Show me how it's done."

Shine stood up easily. "Nope. I know you're scared so let's just get it over with."

Maureen shakily got to her feet, tense and nervous. Shine held her hands out and she took them gratefully. She wobbled as Shine pulled her away from the bench then let go of her hands.

"What do I do?" she squeaked out.

"It would probably be best," Shine said casually, "if you fell down right away."

"You *want* me to fall?" she asked in disbelief.

"The first time is the hardest because you're so afraid of it. If you fall down right off the bat, you'll not be so scared and you'll relax. If you can relax it will be easier for you to learn." Shine skated backwards about 10 feet and Maureen hated her for making it look so easy. "If you can reach me without falling, I'll let you off the hook."

Knowing it was inevitable, Maureen screwed up her courage and pushed off only to immediately go down in a tangle.

"That was very good."

Shine was right beside her, helping her to get back on her feet. Maureen got herself balanced

again and Shine let go of her.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

Maureen took stock. "Just my pride."

"We'll fix that," Shine grinned.

Shine was patient and encouraging but Maureen didn't think she would ever get the hang of it. She kept falling and was beginning to hurt, even if she didn't appear to have bruises and abrasions.

"I'm never going to be good at this, Shine." Maureen was ready to beg if Shine would only let her stop.

"Let's try one more thing and then we'll call it a day."

Maureen felt Shine's arm around her waist and the length of her body was pressed into her back. She took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. *Maybe this skating thing isn't such a bad idea after all.* Shine began to sway side to side, shifting her weight from one skate to the other. Maureen moved with her.

"Don't think about what you're doing," Shine said. "In fact, tell me a story."

"What kind of story?"

"Tell me about your family. What were they like? Did you have siblings?"

Maureen continued to sway, acutely conscious of being held. "My parents were named Alfred and Joanne and I had a younger brother named Geoffrey." Her mind gave way to memory and she remembered her family for Shine. Her father was a loud and boisterous man who had worked as a lineman for the Phone Company. He had not been very generous with hugs and kisses, but he was always there and a willing participant in the family. If most of Maureen's memories had him with a beer in his hand, he had at least been a pleasant drinker. He never had anything bad to say about any one, but mechanical and technical failures drove him crazy. Having never gone himself, he was an ardent supporter of going to college and it was his attitude that made Maureen choose the path she had taken.

Maureen always thought of her mother as an artist, even if she never made any money at it. She had far more creative juice than most people did. That she was not particularly good at anything never seemed to bother her. It was the *process* of creating that her mother had taken the greatest pleasure in. Looking back, Maureen thought her mother should have lived in Greenwich Village or Haight Ashbury. As it was, her mother had involved her children in every artistic endeavor she undertook. Maureen remembered macramé, painting, sculpting, pottery, beading, sewing and a dozen other things. She had been eternally optimistic and supportive of her husband and children. Maureen had loved her mother deeply.

She still remembered when Geoffrey had been brought home from the hospital. Her father had been twice his normal size with pride and had set her new brother in her arms as soon as he came in the door. *What kind of sister do you want to be?* He had asked her. *The good kind, daddy.* He had given her one of his rare kisses and told her he loved her. It was her favorite of many good memories of her father.

Geoffrey had been a wonderful little brother. She had been 7 years old when he was born and she loved him completely. He had her mother's temperament and her father's looks. What she remembered best about him was how willing he was to laugh at himself. Geoffrey never got embarrassed. He came home from school more than once with a story of some silly thing he had done. Once he had...

Maureen realized she was skating without help and stiffened involuntarily. Too late she knew it was a mistake. She crashed onto the pavement and Shine fell over her. "Ouch."

Shine rolled to the side and sat up. "You were doing great!"

Maureen rolled onto her back and decided to not move for a week. "I think I'll just take a nap now."

"What happened? You were doing fine."

"I scared myself."

"Well, don't do that anymore!" Shine laughed.

"Maureen?" A familiar voice asked.

Maureen lifted her head. "Judge Farris?" Maureen had known the Judge casually for more than 10 years. He looked a lot like Santa Claus and took great pleasure in it.

"Are you alright? That was quite a spill you took."

Maureen grabbed Shine's knee to help her sit up. "I'll live." She introduced Shine and let herself be helped to her feet. "Shine seems to be under the impression that a little public humiliation will be good for me," Maureen explained.

Shine laughed heartily. "She was doing great until she started thinking about it."

"I was watching," he grinned. "I only came over to make sure that you were still alive." He gestured behind him. "My grandkids started their summer vacation today and I promised them a picnic. I couldn't believe it was you at first."

Maureen looked past him to see a party in progress. "Well, thanks for checking on me, Judge. Go have fun with your family." She pointed at him with a twinkle in her eye. "But, if you know

what's good for you, you won't say a word about this."

The judge thought this was hysterical and he almost knocked her off her feet slapping her on the back. He said his gracious good-byes and Maureen staggered over to the nearest bench. "I've had enough, Shine."

"I know. I just wanted you to have some success before you quit."

Maureen looked back the way they had come and was surprised to see how far they had skated. "I did okay, didn't I?"

"Better than my first time," Shine laughed.

"Show me what you can do?"

Shine spun in a circle and skated away. Maureen took off her skates and began walking back to their blanket in her stocking feet. She watched Shine, amazed at the footwork she did with such ease. She looked as natural on skates as a dancer. She was beautiful to see. Maureen especially liked the blue spandex outfit she wore. She looked like an Olympic athlete in it and it showed off her body to perfection. Maureen could see the interplay of muscle and bone along the length of Shine's form. Reaching their blanket, Maureen dropped Shine's old skates on the grass and sat down to take off her pads, helmet and heavy socks. Digging a soda out of the cooler, she lay on her least sore hip and watched Shine skating along the park's walkways.

In the last three weeks they had seen each other almost every day. Maureen had even taken lunch to the station twice to eat with Shine while she worked. And ever since the talk in the hot tub, Shine had become more and more confident in their friendship. Maureen knew she was in love. There was no doubt left in her and she knew that soon she would have to press Shine for more intimacy or else stop seeing her.

Shine had stopped to watch some boys doing tricks on a bench. She appeared to be talking to them and lifted an arm as if in display. Maureen wondered what she was doing, then saw her shrug and laugh. She had always seen teenage boys as strange and unusual, but Shine seemed to be easy with them. Thinking about it, Maureen realized that she had never seen anyone take badly to Shine. Everyone seemed to like her, especially children. She wondered if Shine wanted one of her own.

Trying to imagine Shine pregnant, Maureen at first didn't register what she was seeing. Shine had tried to copy the trick the boys were working on and had crashed heavily into a bench. Maureen got to her feet in fear and saw Shine slowly doing the same. She appeared to laugh it off, but skated slowly towards her. Maureen pulled on her shoes and began packing up their things. Shine was injured; she could see it in the way she moved.

"Where are you hurt?" she asked as Shine got closer.

"I'm okay," Shine dropped onto the blanket and lay down on her side. She closed her eyes and breathed shallowly. "It's nothing."

"Liar," Maureen contradicted. "Where are you hurt?"

Shine slowly lifted her arm and twisted her hand to lay on her ribs. "This is the worst."

Maureen lay her hand gently on the spot and could feel it swelling already. There was no way she could look at it without undressing her and she tried to think what to do. "Does it hurt when you breathe?"

Shine slowly took a deep breath and let it out. "It hurts all the time, but it doesn't hurt worse when I breathe."

Wordlessly, she bent to untie Shine's skates. "My house is closer. We're going there now to take a look."

"I'm all right," she protested.

"Fine," Maureen pulled off one skate and tackled the other. "We'll go to my house and you can prove it."

SEVEN

Maureen pushed Shine onto her couch. "Show me."

"I'm not wearing anything under this," Shine said defensively.

"This is not a ploy to see you nude, Shine," Maureen wasn't exactly sure of that, but it sounded like a good thing to say. "Besides, I've seen you in the hot tub many times. It's a little late to become modest, don't you think?"

Shine turned pink and unzipped the suit. Maureen tried not to stare at her breast, but it was hard. She gingerly pulled her arm out of the sleeve and Maureen knelt on the couch next to her. Pushing her shoulder forward with one hand, Maureen examined the bruised lump over her ribs. "I think it just needs ice. Where else do you hurt?"

Shine ducked her head. "That's it."

Maureen *knew* she was lying. "Don't make me search you."

"My hip," she said reluctantly, "but it's just sore. There's nothing wrong with it."

Maureen looked into Shine's eyes and thought she was telling the truth. "Okay. Don't move." She got a cold pack from her freezer and folding it inside a thin towel, held it on Shine's bruise while she pulled her suit back on, trapping it inside.

"Thanks," Shine said as she leaned back against the couch.

Maureen sat down next to her and pulled a knee up so that she could face Shine. Knowing that there was never going to be a good time for it, Maureen decided it was time to talk. "Shine." Her face turned and Maureen looked deep into her light blue eyes. "I know that this is not a good time, but I don't think it ever will be. Something happened to you in the past that makes you very unhappy and afraid. I want you to tell me what it was."

Fear, then grief, trampled across Shine's features.

"I need to know, Shine. We can't be friends anymore if you won't tell me."

"We might not be friends if I do."

"Don't underestimate me," Maureen said firmly. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing happened to me," Shine said painfully. "I happened to someone else."

Maureen saw tears on Shine's cheeks and reached back to the end table for tissues, putting the box next to Shine's leg. She had never really considered that Shine might be anything but the victim. That Jim still called her his friend gave her the courage to go on. "Tell me."

Shine struggled with herself for a long moment, then squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and looked at her with a quivering chin. "My last lover committed suicide."

Oh, God! Somebody died. "What was her name?" Maureen prompted.

"Debra Richter."

Maureen knew that she had not heard the core of Shine's story yet. Afraid, but committed, she pressed on. "Why did she kill herself? Do you know?" She had never actually seen shame on someone's face before, but it was clear she was seeing it now.

"I cheated on her with a stranger and she caught us." Shine lay her head back on the couch, covered her mouth with her hand and choked back a sob.

Maureen let Shine's confession filter through her. She knew alarm bells should be going off, but she couldn't hear them. Laying her arm across the back of the couch, she put her hand on Shine's

shoulder. "Tell me everything, baby. Start at the beginning."

Shine talked for the better part of an hour and Maureen let her tell it without interference. She talked about her job, how much she loved it and being lunch buddies with Debra. Maureen unobtrusively stayed in physical contact throughout the telling: her hand moving from shoulder to arm to knee and back as Shine used her body to punctuate her story. She had to stifle a smile at how Debra had become Shine's roommate. She had suffered from attacks of foot-in-mouth disease in her own past and understood how hard it was to recover gracefully.

As Shine talked about the development and destruction of her relationship with Debra, Maureen analyzed the information with a mind to a possible future with Shine. She had been cheated on once and knew how crushing it was. She expected her heart to pull away from Shine, but she only felt more open and receptive to her. It wasn't as though Shine had deliberately set out to cheat on Debra. Her behavior had been inappropriate, but certainly it was explainable. It was more like a car accident than infidelity. When Shine spoke of the aftermath, not only what happened, but also how she felt, Maureen finally understood why she was not disturbed by what Shine had done.

More than any other person she had ever met, Shine was taking responsibility for what she did. She didn't try to justify any of her actions or feelings or explain them away as someone else's fault. Perhaps she was putting too much blame on herself for Debra's death, but Shine never blamed Debra for what she herself had chosen to do. While what she had done showed little consideration, she seemed to have learned something from it. For the first time, Maureen knew beyond doubt that she could trust her.

Shine's torment in the telling was obvious. Tears flowed freely and at times she had to struggle to speak, but she kept on as though once started she couldn't stop. Maureen ached to hold her but was afraid to distract her.

Shine spoke of traveling and all of the risks she had taken. Maureen was a little intimidated by all of the things that Shine had experienced, but quickly realized that she had not taken any real pleasure from them. When she spoke of her mother's death, Maureen understood. This was familiar territory and she knew of the loneliness and abandonment Shine felt.

"So I came back to get my stuff," Shine cried haltingly, "and I couldn't think of anywhere to go. That's why I stayed here."

Maureen could not have said how, but she knew what Shine needed. She put her hand to the side of her face and smoothed her hair back. "Shine," she said quietly. Shine slowly looked to her and Maureen cupped her cheek. "I forgive you."

Shine folded herself over her knees with a visceral groan and began to sob. Maureen reached around her from behind and hugged her to her chest. Holding her tightly, Maureen rocked her while she cried.

"Maybe it's not my place to say that to you," she whispered in her ear, "but I do forgive you."

Everyone is young and foolish, but few of us have such terrible consequences to our actions. What you did was wrong, but you are *not* responsible for her death. That was *her* choice. Take responsibility for what you did, but *not* for what *she* did."

Maureen buried her face in Shine's hair and let her cry herself out. Shine finally spoke in a small voice. "I don't blame you if you don't want to be friends anymore."

Maureen shook her head. "Beth feels completely justified in what she did to me," she said quietly. "She hasn't lost a moment's sleep over it. She can't even understand why she's in jail. That you haven't tried to justify your actions or evade your burden of culpability lets me know that you're trustworthy."

Shine was quiet for a time. "I need to blow my nose."

"You're not going to run away are you?"

Shine shook her head and Maureen hugged her harder for a moment then let her up. Shine blew her nose and wiped her eyes, then gathered up all of her tissues and went into the kitchen. Maureen smiled at the lump of towel and gel pack still on her back.

I'm tired of sitting on the fence, she thought. I can't go another day without telling her that I want her. I'm not sure she's ready to make love, but if she leaves today without kissing me, it's over.

Shine came back from the kitchen minutes later minus the ice pack and perched on the arm of the couch. "I can't believe that you still want to be friends."

Maureen's heart thumped painfully. "Actually, I don't want us to be *just* friends anymore."

Shine blinked in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Maureen struggled not to faint, "I'm sweet on you."

"Me?" Shine jumped up and backed away from the couch.

"I have feelings for you," Maureen said quickly, "and I want to find out if anything is possible between us."

Shine all but jumped at the front door and opened it with a yank. One hand on the doorjamb, she froze. Maureen waited breathlessly to see if she would run or stay. Eventually, the door closed softly and Shine leaned her head against it.

"Didn't you hear anything I said?" Anguish was evident in her voice.

"Everything."

"How can you ever trust me?"

"How can you ever trust *me*?" Maureen said earnestly. "How do you know if I will be faithful?" She patted the couch next to her. "Come sit down and we'll talk."

Shine hesitantly crossed the room and sat down in the corner of the couch. She picked up a pillow and hugged it across her chest.

"Don't be scared, Shine. I'm not going to jump you. I just want to talk." Maureen had gotten this far but wasn't sure how to proceed. "Can you look at me?"

Shine straightened and met her eyes reluctantly.

"This would be a lot easier for me if I knew how you felt. You didn't leave, so I'm hoping that you have secret feelings for me. Do you?" Maureen clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "Please say yes?"

Shine turned a lovely shade of purple and hid behind the pillow. "I think so."

Maureen let out a huge sigh. She was smiling to beat the band and no longer cared. Reaching out she took Shine's stiff hand in her own. "Why don't I tell you what I want and then you can tell me what you think." Lacing her fingers through Shine's she plunged on. "My lifelong pattern has been to race for the bedroom as soon as I get interested in a woman. It hasn't worked out real well for me. I'd like to do everything differently this time. I want to..." she searched for the right words and smiled when they came to her. "I want to go steady."

Shine lowered the pillow and gaped. "You want to go steady? Like in high school?"

"Yeah," Maureen laughed at herself. She hadn't known she was going to suggest this. "I want to hold hands, talk on the phone for hours, snuggle at the movies and kiss goodnight."

Shine knuckled her forehead with her free hand. "I'm having a hard time with this."

"Which part?" Maureen scooted forward till their knees touched.

"I just told you about this terrible thing I did and you ask me to go steady. I don't understand how you can make a leap like that." Shine looked a little panicked.

"I've been cheated on, Shine, and I've been abused. I've even been robbed, and all by women who never had a bad thing to say about themselves. If they ever even bother to look back, they feel completely justified. They honestly think they did the *right* thing. They believe that I got exactly what was appropriate to the situation." Maureen held Shine's eyes with her own and willed her to believe. "Now, there's a *beautiful* woman in my life. A woman I have strong feelings for, and she looks back at the one foolish moment in her life with shame."

Shine lowered her eyes and Maureen reached out to lift her chin. "You won't cheat on me and you won't hit me. *I know it*. It would probably kill you if you even thought about it. The only

thing left is money."

Shine tensed. "I have money."

"Then you won't need mine," Maureen smiled. She brought Shine's hand between her own. "Do you *want* to go steady?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Maureen." Shine's eyes were fearful and pained.

She held Shine's hand to her cheek. "I don't want to hurt you either."

Shine was quiet for a long time. "I'm not going to be very good at this."

"Is that a yes?" Maureen asked uncertainly.

Shine broke into a tearful grin and tried to hide it. "Yes."

Maureen fell back on the couch with a whoop. At Shine's giggle, she whooped again for the joy of it. Shine's pillow landed on her head and she hugged it tightly.

"Now what?" Shine asked.

"I don't really know," Maureen sat up laughing. "I've never gone steady before."

"Never?"

"Well, with boys in high school, but I don't want to use that as a guide. Do you?"

"No!"

"Then we'll just have to make it up as we go along." Maureen stood up and put her hands on her hips. "I'll bet you're tired." She wanted to fall on Shine with her lips, but held herself back.

"You've had a hell of a day. Why don't you stretch out and take a nap. I've got to go to the store to pick up something for dinner... You are staying for dinner, aren't you?"

Shine nodded and stretched out on the couch. Maureen covered her with a light blanket and handed her the TV remote. "Is there anything in particular you want to eat?"

"Simple and warm," Shine said with a bashful smile.

Shine watched Maureen grab her keys and her purse and leave to go shopping. The top of her head was tingling and she felt a gnawing emptiness that was not entirely unpleasant. The pain in her back and her hip had subsided into a dull ache and she felt raw. She pulled the blanket up around her chin and turned on the TV only because she felt obligated to.

She likes me. Even after what I told her she likes me. She wants me to be her girlfriend! I don't know if I'm ready for this. I want to kiss her, I do! All this time I've been pretending that we're just friends, but I think I knew the first time I saw her that she was something more.

She closed her eyes and pondered the miracle as the drone of the television eased her into sleep.

She woke up gradually, conscious that she was waking. She lay still listening to the TV then opened her eyes. Maureen was sitting on the floor next to her, leaning back against the couch and watching the news. Shine remembered everything in a rush and felt surprisingly good.

Great, in fact. She reached out tentatively and tucked an errant curl behind Maureen's ear. She was rewarded with a deep smile. "How long did I sleep?" she asked quietly.

"Hours. Are you hungry?"

"Starved."

Ten minutes later Shine was sitting on the floor next to Maureen eating grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup on the coffee table. "This is perfect," she said between bites. "Comfort food."

"You talk in your sleep. Did you know that?"

Shine shook her head. "What did I say?"

"I think you were working." Maureen smiled. "It was adorable."

On impulse Shine leaned over and kissed Maureen's cheek. Then her mouth was there and even as strange as it felt to be this close to someone, she kissed that, too. Proud of herself and hoping she hadn't done too badly, she went back to eating.

She couldn't stop staring at Maureen out of the corner of her eye. "I should go home and take a shower," she finally said. She didn't usually wear this suit after working out.

"I have a shower and sweats," Maureen offered.

Shine didn't know whether to accept or not. Maureen seemed to see her confusion.

"I don't want you to go home yet," Maureen said clearly. "I have extra clothes and even a spare toothbrush. Please stay for a while."

"Okay." Shine was glad she couldn't see her own face. She knew she had a goofy grin.

"I thought maybe we could make cookies," Maureen said. "We can eat the rejects and take the rest to work tomorrow."

"I love homemade cookies," Shine said.

"I've got the fixings to make four different kinds. I didn't know what you like."

"I like everything except peanut butter cookies. I'm allergic to peanuts."

"Really? What happens if you eat them?"

"Hives inside my mouth."

"Sounds unpleasant."

"At least it's not a deadly allergy. My father had lots of allergies, but this is the only one I got. What about you?"

"Liver and green peas make me spit."

"That doesn't sound like an allergy," Shine watched Maureen carefully.

"I didn't say it was an allergy."

Shine laughed and bumped shoulders with her. Finished with her food, she picked up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. "Can I take a shower now?"

Maureen got her some clean clothes and showed her where to find everything in the bathroom then left her alone. It felt strange to undress in someone else's house. Shine twisted to see her bruises in the mirror. Gingerly touching it, she decided it wasn't so bad. Her hip and thigh were reddened but not nearly as colorful or painful. Running the shower, she stepped under the hot water and studied Maureen's hygiene products. The gel from Rawley was there. She smelled everything with weak knees at the intimacy of it. She wondered what Maureen would think, then thought of Maureen doing the same thing in her own shower. The idea made her grin and she decided to buy more products just in case Maureen ever did take a shower at her house. That started her thinking about why Maureen might need to and she ground her teeth together as desire raged through her. It had been a long time since she'd had any sexual feelings at all, but she couldn't remember them ever ambushing her quite like this. The feelings ebbed slowly and left her feeling translucent. Shaky, Shine hurriedly finished her shower and got dressed. She felt better after she brushed her teeth and combed her hair.

Making cookies turned out to be fun. Maureen stayed close, rubbing up against her and touching constantly. Seeing that Maureen wanted it she began touching on her own. A hand placed just so on her back as she reached for something; leaning back into her body when Maureen looked over her shoulder; brushing imaginary particles from her clothing. Shine felt as though they were playing a game of Touch. To win, all you had to do was play and everyone who plays wins.

She felt naked under Maureen's clothes and delighted in the sensuality of it. She felt graceful and

lithesome in her movements and wondered if Maureen felt the same way. When they had the last batch in the oven and the dishes done, Shine leaned back against the counter with a sigh. "I've had the weirdest day."

Maureen laughed and leaned into her. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Shine circled Maureen with an arm and a smile. "First, I almost killed myself at the park trying to impress a woman. Then I relived the death of my mother and the worst mistake of my life. After that, this absolutely *gorgeous* woman asked me to go steady. I kissed someone for the first time in almost nine years and helped make more cookies than I've eaten in my entire life."

Maureen laughed into her shoulder. "What was the best part?"

Her throat tight, Shine tilted Maureen's chin back and softly ran her thumb over full lips. "This part." She slowly pressed her lips to Maureen's. Taking her time Shine studied Maureen's mouth with her own. She hadn't remembered how soft a woman's lips were. She found that there was a great deal about kissing she had forgotten. It was simply exquisite and it touched something deep inside of her.

It took her a moment to recognize the cooking timer when it went off. She forced herself to pull back and was surprised to see that Maureen was just as breathless. She knew she couldn't speak yet, so she left Maureen holding the counter and pulled the last cookies out. She quickly moved them off the pan onto a towel to cool and placed the pan in the sink. Maureen pressed into her back and put her arms around Shine's middle.

Shine turned in her arms and held her tightly. "It's hard for me to believe that you *want* me this way," she whispered.

"Believe it, baby."

Shine fought the tears of euphoria that came to her eyes. She was done with crying for the day. She adjusted her arms and legs to draw Maureen closer, wanting to be inside the same skin with her.

The cookies were cold when they finally let go of each other.

Shine was playing every love song she could find when Jim came into the booth.

"I hear that you're the one responsible for the cookies," he said.

"Maureen and I made them." Shine found it hard to say her name without giggling.

Jim grinned and sat down in the guest chair. "Something's up. What is it?"

Shine felt the blush in her face and couldn't look at him. "We're going steady."

"I'll be damned!" he crowed. "Congratulations!"

Shine glanced over and saw that Jim was genuinely pleased. "You really mean that?"

"I could *not* be happier," he insisted.

"I told her everything." Shine felt he should know.

"That's none of my business," he said easily, "but I'm glad. Now you don't have to worry that she won't like you when she finds out."

Recognizing the truth of it, Shine decided to come clean. "I have to tell you something, too, but I need you not to say anything here at the station." He waited quietly and seemingly unconcerned. "I have a Master's from UCLA in electrical engineering."

"I knew that you knew more than you were telling," he laughed. Raising his hand he shook his finger at her. "You lied on your job application. That's a termination offense."

"How did you know?" Shine thought she had done a good job of hiding it.

Jim seemed to be having a great time. "I've been working with you for four years, Shine. You understand when I explain what I'm doing and you get this look on your face when I try to pull someone's leg with meaningless tech talk. I've seen you checking my work. You try to look like you're just curious, but I know you're checking. How am I doing by the way?"

Shine started to giggle. "Mostly great, but I think I can help with the phase variance between the transmitter and the translators if you want me to."

"Are you busy Saturday?" He sat forward seriously.

"Let me ask Maureen."

"You're whipped," he teased.

Shine held up her hand and went into a break. When it was over, she tossed her headphones on the counter. "You don't seem to be threatened by my education. Most guys would be."

"If you wanted my job you would have applied for it. I admit I was a bit worried for awhile, but not anymore. Besides, I know something that you don't know."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"I'm not sure you'll believe it, but here goes." He leaned forward again to put his arms on the counter. "Bill is worried that you're here to get experience before going on to a larger market."

"Why would he think that?" Shine checked her next break and started setting it up.

"Because you're good enough to do it."

Shine snorted in disbelief. "Right."

"What reason do I have to lie to you?"

Shine couldn't figure that one out. "Say I believe you. So what?"

"Bill would never take you off the air and put you in engineering. For that one reason alone my job is safe. But it does make your possibilities interesting."

"How so?"

"He'll do anything you want to keep you here. You're the Rainmaker. Do you want different hours? More money? Special equipment? Name it and he'll do it for you."

Jim was completely serious. Shine looked at him with astonishment. "You're right. I don't believe it."

Jim shrugged. "If it's true you don't have to believe it."

"Why hasn't he said anything?"

"He's not going to say anything until he has to because he's afraid you'll ask for something that he can't give you." Jim grinned. "Don't they teach people how to think at UCLA?"

"I didn't take that class," she said absently. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to ask for something."

"Ah ha!" Shine laughed. "Now we get down to it. What is it?"

"You work 32.5 hours on the air and 2.5 in production. I want you to go in there, tell him what you're qualified to do and ask to work another 5 hours a week with me in engineering. I need you."

"What if he fires me for lying on my application?"

"You're not listening, Shine." He appeared to be frustrated. "You're the best jock in a 250 mile radius. It's unlikely that you could tell him *anything* that would make him fire you."

Shine got up to change a tape and give herself a chance to think about Jim's revelations. She wished that Maureen were with her. The more she thought about it, the queasier she felt.

"Will you do it?" Jim asked.

"I don't know. I need time to think about it."

"Okay." He got up and came around to put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm really glad about you and Maureen. Can I call Carol and make sure she knows?"

Shine blushed again. "Sure."

He hugged her quickly and left her alone.

Shine lay with her head in Maureen's lap watching the evening news. Maureen's fingers were playing with her ear and making her jumpy. "I told Jim about us today."

"I know. Carol called me."

"I also told him about my degree."

"What did he say?"

"He wants me to tell Bill and ask to work an extra 5 hours a week with him in engineering."

"How do you feel about that?"

Shine rolled onto her back so she could see her face. "Do you think I'm a good deejay?"

"I know you are."

Maureen's fingers traced her lips and Shine closed her eyes briefly to enjoy the feeling. "I can't think when you do that."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No."

"Then quit complaining."

Shine smiled and opened her eyes. "Jim says I'm the best jock in 250 miles."

"Is that all? What else did he say?"

Shine recounted their conversation for her.

"I'm not sure what your dilemma is," Maureen frowned. "If you want to work with Jim, then you should."

Shine thought over everything she had learned that day. "I guess I'm a little scared. My life is changing faster than I can keep up with. All of a sudden I'm becoming...involved. And it's a *good* thing, but it's so opposite everything I've been for so long that I feel completely out of my element."

"Maybe you just need time to get your balance. There's no reason you have to decide this right now. Wait until it's what *you* want, not what Jim wants. He'll understand."

Covering Maureen's hand with her own, Shine turned her head and placed her lips in the palm. "That helps. Thank you."

"Is this, what's happening between you and I, something you want or is it because I want it?"

"I do want it," Shine said slowly. "But I'm not sure that I believe it yet."

"What do you mean?"

Shine sat up and turned to face her. "It doesn't feel real. I was trying not to let this ever happen and now it is and I feel like someone spun me in circles and I'm trying not to fall down. But at the same time, it feels *so* good and I'm afraid that when I stop being dizzy it will go away."

Maureen had a little smile on her face. "I make you dizzy?"

Shine struggled to put her feelings into words. "It feels so good when you touch me and when we...when we kiss." She could feel her face getting hot. "But at the same time it feels kind of strange." Maureen's hand slid over her knee and she caught her breath at the sensation it produced.

"Can you explain how it's strange? I'm not sure I understand."

Shine's attention was focused on the unlikeliness of the hand on her leg. "I don't know if I can explain it."

"Take your time. I'm not in a hurry."

She wasn't sure she could make herself speak, so she closed her eyes and waited for words to come. "I remember being...intimate. But it's almost like remembering a movie or a good book. It all seems so new and different with you. To see your face close to mine, to see your hands on me, the smell of you surrounding me...I feel like I'm in a state of continual surprise. It's so...*much*. Like a cold shower or biting into a hot pepper. I can't quite catch my breath and I forget who I am. It's wonderful, but sometimes it's terrifying."

"What are you afraid of?"

Shine tried to ignore her hand as it explored Maureen's arm. She turned the question over in her mind, looking for clarity. Thinking about how she felt was still a struggle and she had to force her mind to cooperate. "I'm afraid of how necessary it feels to have you with me. When you leave I feel...empty and...lost. Aren't you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Of me."

"Only that you'll stop me."

Shine looked up into open brown eyes. She used the backs of her fingers to tentatively stroke Maureen's cheek. "I want to stop you and I don't. And I'm expecting you to push me away."

"I don't want to."

"I keep thinking that you should-that you will."

"I won't."

Shine turned her hand over and used her fingertips to trace the contours of Maureen's lips, the bridge of her nose, the tiny hairs of her eyebrows and the shape of her ears. Maureen lay her head back on her couch and exposed her neck. Shine slid her hand over the smooth skin and could feel air moving rapidly through her throat. "You like this."

"Very much," Maureen whispered.

Feeling stranger than ever, Shine leaned over to place her lips over the pulse in her neck. The heavy beat brought out a similar throbbing in her lips and she closed her eyes as Maureen's mouth turned to meet hers. Roaring filled her ears as Maureen's tongue entered her mouth.

EIGHT

"If I rent *Desert Hearts*, will you watch it with me?"

Maureen smiled. The past week had been beyond her imagining and it just kept getting better. "We'd better watch it your house. Something's wrong with my VCR."

"Bring it with you and I'll take a look at it."

Maureen laughed into the phone. "So now you're a video expert, too?"

"And telephones." Shine's voice was indignant. "I made a point of learning more than theory in school, you know."

"Okay, baby," she conceded. "But if you break it, you buy it."

"If it doesn't work then it can't be worth much," Shine laughed. "You've got a deal."

Maureen hung up with a smile. Most of the time she felt stupid with pleasure and wondered why people weren't complaining about it. She had actually been hoping that Shine *could* fix the VCR. She had enjoyed the picnic on the mountain two days before with Carol and the kids while Jim and Shine had worked on the transmitter. Watching Shine work in her chosen field was exciting and she looked forward to leaning over her shoulder to watch those hands operate.

The phone rang again and she picked it up. "Hello?"

"Ms. Baird? This is Stan Russell of the District Attorney's office. I don't know if you remember me."

"I do, actually." Maureen resisted a twist of fear. "You were very helpful to me." He had been in charge of negotiating the plea with Beth's lawyer.

"I'm glad you remember it that way. I called because I have some news."

Her stomach lurched. "I'm not going to like it, am I?"

"No," he said simply, "but it was inevitable. Beth is going to be released early for good behavior slash overcrowding."

All the blood drained from her head. "When?"

"July First."

"But, that's Wednesday!"

"I know. I fought it, but I was lucky to get these 2 days. Just remember that the restraining order is still in effect and if she puts even a *finger* out of line she goes back in for the next 3 and a half years."

"That's small comfort, Stan."

"I know that, too. I have an appointment with her lawyer in the morning to discuss the terms of her release. Is there anything specific you want me to bring up?"

"I have the keys to her car and the storage unit. If I drop them off to you can you get them to her?"

"Absolutely."

"Then please tell her that I will pay for one last month on the unit as a gesture of goodwill. It's hers until August 1st. I went out every month and started up her car so it should be just fine. It's even got a full tank. I kept up the registration, but not the insurance." Maureen thought for a moment. "If she thinks anything is missing, can she go through you to ask me about it?"

"No problem. I still can't believe you've been so generous. Especially after what she did to you."

"It wasn't generosity, Stan. I'm hoping it will mean something when she gets out. Maybe if I behave courteously, she'll do the same. I guess I'll find out soon enough."

"If you have *any* problems, or even suspect that there might be a problem, you call me first thing. Do you still have my number?"

Maureen quickly flipped through her Rolodex. "I'm looking at your card."

"Good. I'm on call for you at any hour."

"Thanks, Stan. You've been great. I really appreciate your efforts."

After hanging up with Stan, Maureen sat back in her chair and stared out the window. Dread had her by the back of the neck and she could hear her heart thumping madly. She wanted to call Shine, but knew there was nothing she could do and she would only worry. She knew she'd have to tell her, but not over the phone.

She felt the urge to do what needed doing as quickly as possible. She grabbed her things and turned the library over to a senior assistant. She drove out to the storage unit first and made sure that everything was okay. The car started up fine and she let it run for only a minute before shutting it off and locking it all up. She went into the office and paid for the last month and made sure that they understood that if there were any problems they should call Stan. They seemed unhappy to learn that there might *be* problems, but Maureen couldn't care.

Next, she drove to Stan's office and dropped the keys off with his receptionist. That done, she drove home. After a quick shower to wash away some of the sick feeling she had, she unhooked her VCR, got in her car and drove to Shine's house.

She fussed and worried on Shine's porch in the summer sun for an hour and a half before Shine finally got home. She felt better immediately upon seeing her.

"Hey, you're early." Shine sauntered up the steps with a video case under her arm. "Couldn't wait to see me, eh?"

"Nope." Maureen accepted Shine's kiss as casually as she could when what she wanted was to throw herself into Shine's arms and weep.

"I see you brought your VCR." Shine pushed the front door open and let Maureen go in first. Tossing her keys on the new entry table, she took the machine from Maureen and headed to the garage. "Grab a stool from the kitchen counter and come keep me company," Shine threw over her shoulder.

Maureen put her purse down and locked the front door. She carried a stool out to Shine and sat down as close to her as she could without interfering. Shine already had the top off of the VCR.

"Are you sure you know how to fix that?"

"Yes. I see it eats tapes. Is there anything else wrong with it?"

"It wasn't tracking well."

"Okay." Shine opened a case of tools and began freeing the tape.

Maureen needed to hear the sound of her voice. "How was your day?"

"Too many dedications." Shine hated requests because they were time consuming, but she had a special loathing for dedications. None of her listeners would ever know that though. She was too professional for that.

Maureen watched Shine's hands. She frequently had vivid dreams about those hands. The competence they exhibited now would almost surely haunt her later on. She jumped when Shine spoke.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

Shine didn't even bother to look up. "You know what I mean. I know you well enough to know when something is bothering you."

Maureen braced herself. "Beth is getting out of jail on Wednesday."

Tools clattered on the workbench and Maureen was swept into Shine's arms. She clung to her, finally allowing herself to cry. Burying her face in Shine's neck she hoped she would never let go.

"When did you find out?"

"Less than a minute after I talked to you," she sniffled.

"What can I do?"

Maureen tightened her hold on Shine in answer. They stood in each other's arms until Maureen couldn't remember being anywhere else. She relaxed her grip and Shine guided her to her stool. "I really needed that."

Shine sat down as well and held her hand firmly. "How can I help?"

"I just needed to be held."

"I meant, what can I do to help you feel safe after she gets out?"

"Nothing." She laughed nervously. "Really, Shine, I'm okay."

"Maybe you should get a dog."

Maureen tried to joke. "I could always borrow Mabel."

"What about an alarm system? I'll design it and Jim can help me put it in tomorrow night. He's really good at that sort of thing."

"No."

"There has to be something I can do." Shine insisted.

Maureen smiled. "You can fix my VCR and give me kisses."

Shine pulled their foreheads together. "Just promise me that if there's something I can do you'll tell me."

"I promise, baby." Maureen kissed Shine. "Do you want something to drink? Can I start dinner?"

"Knock yourself out." She turned back to the VCR and picked up her tools. "Do Carol and Jim know yet?"

"I wanted to tell you first."

"Call them, Maureen, or I will."

Maureen ached with love. "Yes, dear."

"You could stay here," Shine offered late on Wednesday night. "The big bedroom is ready to sleep in and I'd feel much better if I knew you were safe. Or I could sleep on your sofa. There's

no need for you to be alone."

Maureen was snuggled up on the couch against Shine and could hear her heartbeat. It was tempting to let herself be taken care of, but she also needed to know that she couldn't be manipulated by Beth's existence. "It's her first night out of jail, Shine. I'm sure she's got more important things in mind and I can't hide forever. This is something I have to do or I'll never be able to stop looking over my shoulder."

Shine hugged her tightly. "I'm scared for you."

"I'm scared, too. But it's the right thing for me to do."

"Will you at least call me as soon as you get home so I know you got in okay?"

"Of course."

"And call me as soon as you wake up?"

Maureen chuckled. "You're such a worrywart."

Shine tilted her chin up. "I don't want anything to happen to you," she said.

"Nothing will happen, baby."

"I love it when you call me that," Shine whispered.

Maureen whispered back, "Baby, baby, baby," and watched Shine's mouth lower to her own. She always felt so helpless in the moment before their lips met; knowing it was coming and anticipating the power of its effect on her. Shine had been tentative with her initial kisses and Maureen had enjoyed the naiveté of them, but their kisses had become increasingly more intense and passionate. And skillful, she had to admit.

Most women loved kissing, she knew, but Shine seemed to love it more than most and she was remarkably inventive about it. Maureen had thought that she knew everything there was to know about kissing, but Shine did things to her mouth that surprised her. She had heard once that people kiss the way they like to *be* kissed, so she learned everything Shine did and gave it back in equal measure.

Shine pulled back with a gasp. Maureen lay her hand over Shine's heart and felt it pounding as hard as her own.

"I love kissing you," Shine said breathlessly.

"I love kissing you, too. You're very, very good at it."

"I'm learning from the best," Shine sighed.

"You kiss in ways I've never experienced before," Maureen said. "If anyone is learning, it's me."

"I kiss different?" Shine looked uncertain.

"Delightfully so. I've always loved kissing, but with you it's an art form."

"But kissing is kissing."

"Not the way you do it, baby." Maureen lay her head on Shine's shoulder. "When you kiss it feels like you're making love to my mouth."

"That's what kissing is."

"Not with anyone I've ever kissed before. You've ruined me for anyone else," Maureen laughed. "You're stuck with me."

Maureen lifted her head as Shine pulled back. "I don't want to be with anyone else, not ever." Shine's eyes were fearfully intent. "And I don't want you to be with anyone else either."

Maureen smiled and traced Shine's lips with her finger. "I thought that was understood between us."

Shine looked hesitant. "I wish...I'm not..."

"What is it, babe? Just say it."

"I'm not ready yet...to make love. Is that okay?"

She lay her head back on Shine's shoulder. "Of course."

"You don't mind? You're not hurting?"

Maureen laughed softly. "No, I don't mind. As for hurting; well, I know how to alleviate that."

Shine tensed. "You mean you..."

"When I need to, yes. Don't you?"

Shine relaxed slowly. "Not since I was a teenager."

"There's nothing wrong with it you know." She was worried that Shine would think she was perverse. "It's not as nice as I imagine it will be with you, but it keeps me sane and I enjoy it."

"After...Debra..." Shine paused. "I haven't had any sexual feelings."

"None?"

"Not till you."

Curious, Maureen lifted her face to watch Shine speak. "What does it feel like?"

Shine's ears turned pink and she spoke haltingly. "Sometimes it's electrical. I can feel it dancing under my skin and I feel like the top of my head is going to come off. Other times it's like my bones have turned into honey on a warm day."

"Sounds nice."

"Sometimes when I know you're going to touch me, my skin hurts. And then when you do, it hurts even more, but not like pain. It's different somehow."

Maureen kissed the side of her neck. "What else?"

Shine cleared her throat. "A couple of times, when I've been thinking about you, I've had these incredible...*rushes*...of feeling. It's almost like coming. It happened that time I took a shower at your house and a bunch of times at work."

"I get those surges, too," Maureen soothed. "You sound normal to me. Maybe since you haven't had these feelings for so long it's just a bit overwhelming for you right now. It won't be so scary when you've had a chance to let your body remember." Shine's arms tightened on her and Maureen smiled.

"I have something for you."

Maureen let her get up and go to the closet by the front door. Shine pulled out a wood baseball bat with a ribbon on it. "What's that for?"

"I accept that you are going to go home tonight. I even understand why. But I couldn't not do anything." She bounced the bat in her hands. "Have you ever taken a self-defense class?"

Uncomfortable with where the conversation was headed, Maureen stood up. "No, but I don't think this is necessary, Shine."

"I hope it's not. Now," Shine gripped the bat like she knew how to use it. "Swinging the bat doesn't work."

Maureen laughed nervously. "Really, Shine. I don't..."

"Please," Shine said seriously. "Just listen. Even if you don't need it, you should have the information."

"Okay," she said reluctantly.

"If you try to hit her with it like you would hit a baseball, it won't work. All she has to do is step inside the length of your arms and the bat is useless."

Maureen nodded as Shine demonstrated. "So what good is it?"

Shine shifted the bat to hold it with her hands spread far apart. "Jab it at her. If you can hit her hard enough in the solar plexus, or even if you break a rib, it will make it hard for her to breathe. When you can't breathe your body starts to shut down your extremities. It will make her weak. It's also really hard to block a jab."

"Where did you learn this?"

"I took a self-defense class in college. That's where I met Reggie."

"Who's Reggie?"

"She was my lover in college. Now..."

Maureen couldn't resist. "Was she pretty?"

Shine blinked. "Not anything like you, but yes. Can we continue?"

Maureen stifled a smile and nodded.

"One of the most important things to remember is to *keep* hitting her. Women will usually hit you once and expect you to get the message. From what I understand, Beth is not that kind of woman. I'm guessing that you are." Shine's face became grim. "You have to hit her as hard and fast as you can and not stop until she's on the ground. Once she's down, swing the bat at her legs until you're *sure* she can't stand up and come after you."

"I don't know if I can do this," Maureen said doubtfully. "It sounds so brutal."

Shine gently took Maureen's left hand and held up her crooked fingers so that she would have to see them. "*This* was brutal." She put the bat handle in her damaged hand and closed her fingers on it. "This is *self-defense*."

Maureen understood in a way she never had before. "Okay."

"One other thing," Shine said. "If she gets a hold of the bat, let go of it. Don't fight for it because it will put you off balance. Pull your fingers back like this and hit her in the face with the heel of your hand as many times as you can. Then kick her knees out."

Maureen stepped into Shine's arms and held her tightly. *What a treasure she is! Instead of arguing with me about my decision, she respects me and turns her energy to making sure I have the means to protect myself.* "Thank you, Shine."

"If something happens," Shine said thickly, "call me as soon as you can, but call the police first."

"I promise."

"I have one more thing for you." Maureen stepped back reluctantly as Shine reached into her pocket and pulled out a key. "I want you to keep this."

Maureen was stunned. "Are you sure?"

"Beth doesn't know about me so it's safe for you here. You're welcome to sleep here or just hang out. You don't need my permission to come here. Just come."

Maureen dropped the bat and pulled Shine in for a kiss. She felt Shine's fingers slip the key into her back pocket, then slide up her back in a spine chilling caress to cup her head. Their mouths were hungry and demanding. Maureen quickly reached the point of no return and pulled away with a groan. "I have to go."

"Call me," Shine gasped.

Shine woke up excited about the Fourth of July. In the last four years she had always volunteered to work the most inconvenient shifts on holidays. This was partly so others could be with their families, but it served a larger purpose in making her unavailable for invitations from well-meaning co-workers. She had decided weeks ago that she wanted this day to share with Maureen.

It was very early and she debated over calling her. So far there had been no sign of Beth, but it had only been 3 days. Unable to relax without knowing, she picked up the phone and dialed the number. There was no answer and Shine felt a glimmer of panic. She forced herself to wait for ten agonizing minutes-in case she was in the shower-and hit redial. Still no answer.

Shine flung the covers off and yanked on some clothes. She headed for the living room to find her shoes and discovered Maureen asleep on the couch. Relief made her weak and she staggered over to sit next to her. "Maureen?" Sleepy arms drew Shine down and she snuggled into her. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Maureen murmured. "I just haven't been sleeping well, so I came here. I hope that was okay."

Okay? It's terrific! "Of course it is."

"What time is it?"

"Very early. I'm going to go skating for a couple of hours," she decided quickly. "My bed is

more comfortable than this couch. Why don't you move in there? I'll make coffee when I come back and wake you up."

She bundled Maureen into her bed and watched as she fell asleep again almost immediately. Shine changed into skating clothes and went outside. With the sun still behind the mountains, it was brisk this early in the morning and Shine was cold at first. She quickly warmed with her exertions. She held tightly to the glow of contentment she felt at knowing that Maureen had not only come to her house to sleep in safety, but that she was even at that moment sleeping in her bed. She struggled with the desire to go home and watch her.

Nearly two hours later, Shine skated up the walk and sat on the porch to take off her skates. Sneaking inside, she went straight to the kitchen and waited while the coffee brewed. Pouring for them both, she added half-and-half to Maureen's and went to the bedroom.

She stood next to the bed for several minutes just to look at her. Every time she thought she could not be any happier she was. Placing the hot cups on the night-stand, Shine lay down behind Maureen and snuggled up to her.

"You're back," Maureen mumbled happily.

"And I brought coffee," she murmured into curly brown hair.

"I think I'm in love."

"You smell good." Shine sighed as Maureen turned over and entwined their bodies together. "I have to take a shower. Do you want one, too?"

"Together?"

Shine stiffened uncontrollably as a wave of passion surged through her. She shook with the force of it and desperately clung to Maureen. She whimpered at the weakness it left behind.

"Well, that's a good sign," Maureen laughed merrily. "Do it again."

Shine began laughing and couldn't quit.

Shine dropped down onto the blanket with a weary sigh. Fireworks wouldn't start for another hour, but they were tired from the day's activities and needed a break.

After a light breakfast, they had gone to the park and watched a reenactment of America's birth. Shine would not ordinarily have enjoyed it, but Maureen pointed out the councilmen, supervisors, judges and prominent businessmen who made up the cast and provided some local color on each that made it rather fun.

"How come you're not in this?" she asked at one point.

Maureen folded her arms with a snort. "Apparently, women played no part in this piece of American history, aside from needlework. As soon as they can figure out how to circumvent Mary's existence, I'm sure they'll be doing a skit at Christmas time as well."

Shine had smiled at her indignation, but after the play was over she had led the way to the arts and crafts fair. They had spent hours combing through the huge variety of booths. Shine had seen quite a few things she had liked, but nothing that had called her name.

They went back to the park for a late lunch. The Moose Lodge was putting on a barbecue and after eating till they were stuffed, Shine followed Maureen around as she visited with old friends and colleagues. Shine would have preferred not being introduced to every one, but at the same time she secretly enjoyed the excitement folks expressed at meeting her.

The carnival had taken up the rest of the day. At Maureen's request they had paced themselves, but they had eventually ridden every ride at least once. Shine's favorite had been the Ferris Wheel. She still wished she had been able to kiss her as they went over the top, but they had been far too visible to get away with it. She had settled for holding her hand and *thinking* about the kissing.

With the day's finale approaching, Maureen had chosen a spot on the edge of the high school's athletic field that she said would give them a good view of the fireworks, but was far from where people liked to cluster. She assured Shine that they would have enough privacy that discreet cuddling was possible.

"Did you have a good time today?" Maureen asked.

"I always have a good time with you," Shine smiled. Rolling up her jacket she put it under her head as she lay down. "I still wish you had let me buy you that necklace."

Maureen curled up at her side and lay her head on her shoulder. "Thank you for respecting my decision."

"I just wish I understood why."

"Sometimes people use money to express their feelings. I just want to be sure that doesn't happen to us." Maureen's hand rubbed Shine's belly.

Shine swallowed before asking, "Are we at the point in our relationship where we can talk about finances?"

"I guess so." Maureen pulled up Shine's shirt and slipped her hand underneath it. "What do you want to know?"

Shine's nerves lit up like a Christmas tree and she lost her train of thought. She captured

Maureen's hand and held it. "I have to tell you something."

Maureen gently twisted her hand away and laid it back on Shine's belly. Raising up on her elbow she looked down at her. "So tell me."

"I have money," Shine gazed up into Maureen's brown eyes.

"Good for you."

Shine closed her eyes as Maureen tucked her shirt up under her breasts, leaving her belly exposed. Fingers lightly traced along her ribs and around her navel. Shine couldn't catch her breath. Her heart had settled inside her blue jeans and was drumming an urgent message. "Maureen."

"Hmmm?"

"I have money."

"You said that, baby."

Shine made a last effort at coherency. "I have a lot of money."

"Okay, I'll bite," Maureen chuckled. "How much money do you have?"

"Millions." Maureen's hand settled down and Shine opened her eyes. She looked into Maureen's big eyes and saw uncertainty. "Millions," she repeated more clearly.

"How many millions are we talking about?"

"Almost twelve? Maybe more. I'm not sure how much exactly. I don't like to think about it."

Maureen's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"I wanted to tell you a long time ago, but I wasn't sure if it was appropriate. I told you I had money when you asked me to go steady, but you didn't seem interested so..."

Maureen sat up and rubbed her eyes. Shine pulled her shirt down and sat next to her. "It wasn't a secret exactly. I wasn't trying to keep a secret. Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not mad," Maureen said slowly. "I kind of figured you had some money; I just didn't think that big. Give me a minute."

Shine sat quietly, watching people gather out on the field. The sun had fallen below the mountains and twilight was beginning. Children ran around with neon colored loops that became more vivid as the sky darkened. Anticipation hung in the air like fog. Shine glanced at Maureen. She was shaking her head.

"Maureen?" Shine put her hand on Maureen's leg. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I've been putting as much money as I can into a 401K from the very beginning. Theoretically, it'll be worth a bit more than 2 million when I retire. But that's a far away thing and doesn't really mean anything yet. I hardly ever think about it, but 12 million dollars? Is that even a real number?"

Shine really didn't want money to be an issue. She decided to try joking Maureen out of it. "Now can I buy you that necklace?"

"No! It's not the money, Shine."

"I know. I was just making a joke." She felt as if she had been reprimanded.

Maureen rubbed her eyes again. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm trying to make myself believe that it doesn't matter. Twelve million dollars: why does that seem so daunting?"

"I know. It scares me, too." Shine put her arm around Maureen's shoulders and hugged her. "My parents died to give me that money and if I could trade it for even one day with them I wouldn't miss it a bit, but I admit that it's nice to know it's there. I can do anything I want, but that just makes me feel mercenary. I bought the house and some of the furniture with it, but I live off of my income from the radio station. I've never felt comfortable with it. I try not to think about it because it makes me tense."

"Aren't you ever tempted to spend it?"

Shine could feel herself getting fidgety. "Not on myself."

"Why not?"

"I think it's because I didn't earn it."

"Or deserve it?"

Shine was stunned at the insight. "I never thought of that."

"I'm sure your parents thought you deserved all that money. They spent their whole lives making it for you."

Shine squeezed her shoulder. "They would have loved you."

Maureen pushed her back down to the blanket and slipped both hands under her shirt. "So, my girlfriend is a multi-millionaire. Imagine that."

"I don't have it on me at the moment." Shine didn't know what to do with her hands, so she put

them behind her head. She didn't want to do anything that would interfere with the almost unbearable eroticism of Maureen's touch. "Unless you take credit cards."

Maureen swung a leg over her hips and sat on her lap. "You said 'Not on myself'. What *have* you spent your money on?"

Shine didn't want to say. It had been done anonymously so that no one would know. Maureen's hands went to the buttons on her jeans and went to work. Shine tensed. "What are you doing?" No one was close enough to see anything, but even from a distance it would be obvious what was going on.

"Tell me what you spent it on and I won't strip you naked."

Shine gasped as her shirt was lifted up and Maureen leaned over to kiss her ribs. "Stewart Street Park!"

Maureen sat back with a devilish grin. "See how easy that was?"

Shine was wearing a sports bra, but she reached down to pull her shirt back over it. Not wanting to stop Maureen all together she didn't pull it down to cover her belly. "People can see what you're doing, you know."

Maureen spread her hands out over Shine's stomach. "I remember the story about the park. They collected money for 6 months and only had a few thousand dollars; then suddenly there was a *large* donation. That was you?"

"Yes. Everybody was making noise about what a great thing it would be, but they wouldn't put any of their money into it." Shine struggled to explain as hands moved in circles from her groin to her ribcage. "Play is vitally important in the development of intelligence. Those poor kids *needed* that park and no one else was willing to help them."

"That was a good thing you did."

"*Please* don't tell anyone."

Maureen smiled and fastened the bottom two buttons of her jeans. "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

At the look in Maureen's eyes, she only hesitated a moment. "Do you remember a couple of years ago, the little girl that needed the kidney transplant?"

"Chelsea Tanner?" Maureen's hands froze. "You did that?"

"I saw her mom on TV and I just felt so bad for her..."

"I know her, Shine." Maureen's voice was urgent. "I went to school with Marilu. You saved a

whole family!"

Shine covered her eyes in guilty pleasure. "Don't make a big thing of it." Maureen dragged her hands away and pulled her till she sat up.

"It *is* a big thing, baby. You don't know how hard it was for them just to *have* Chelsea. They spent every dime they had and mortgaged his printing business to pay for her conception alone. They love her like you can't believe and when she got sick they didn't have enough left to protect her. Watching her die was killing them. You didn't just pay for the transplant. You paid for his surgery and recovery and Marilu's hotel while they healed. You saved his business. *You changed lives.*"

Shine waited patiently while Maureen covered her face with kisses and hugged her repeatedly. "I did it to make myself feel good," she finally said. "There was nothing heroic about it. The money meant nothing to me."

"It meant something to them," Maureen insisted. "And there's nothing wrong with feeling good about what you did. I gave them \$2500 and I felt good about it. Every time I see Chelsea I feel good about it. You should be proud."

Shine wrapped her arms around her and lay her head against Maureen's breasts so she wouldn't have to look at her.

"You should meet them, Shine."

"No. Absolutely not."

"Why not? They're good people and they would want to thank you."

"No." Shine was adamant about this. "I did it for my own selfish reasons. I didn't do it for them. That everything worked out and they're happy and healthy is beside the point. I don't think I could bear to see their gratitude. How can I accept it when the money wasn't important to me? Anyway, they'll never feel like they've thanked me enough if they love their daughter as much as you say. They'll just feel indebted to me. If I remain a mystery, maybe they'll attribute it to the grace of God and get on with their lives. That's the way I want it."

Maureen's eyes were filled with tears as she tilted Shine's face up. "Okay. I'll respect your wishes. But on their behalf-Thank you."

Shine sighed with relief. "You're welcome."

"Is there anything else?"

"I swear," Shine grinned, "that's it. I limit myself to fifty dollars for things like the fireworks fund and the Christmas food bank."

Maureen studied her eyes for sincerity, then held her lips close over Shine's and spoke softly into her mouth. "You're a good person, Shine Avery. Even if you don't believe it."

Shine felt the familiar dizziness in her head at the taste of Maureen's breath. "I'm glad you think so."

"I liked torturing you for information."

Shine swallowed painfully. *I liked it, too.* She heard the first bang of the fireworks and the response of the crowd. "The show is starting."

Traffic after the fireworks show was glacial. It was very late when they pulled onto Maureen's street. Both women leaned forward at the play of police lights on the suburban homes.

"It's my house," Maureen said quietly.

"Maybe it's not."

"It is." Her voice was calm, but Shine could hear the dread underneath.

"Maybe we should go to my house and call to find out..."

"I need to know."

Shine understood. She would feel the same if it were her house. She pulled up behind a cruiser and they got out.

NINE

An officer challenged them as they approached. "This is Maureen Baird," Shine said quickly. "She lives here." He waved them past the yellow tape and Shine took Maureen's hand.

Maureen's eyes were locked on the ruin of her car and her hand covered her mouth. Shine felt completely helpless. Staying close was the only thing she could think of to do.

Maureen's car was a mess. All of the windows were busted out. The headlights and taillights were shattered and deep scratches were etched into the paint. All four tires were flat and the side

mirrors, windshield wipers and radio antenna had been broken off and left on the ground. Maureen stood to one side staring and silent. Hoping to find at least one good thing to say, Shine walked around the car and studied it. The damage appeared to be superficial. She wanted to look at the engine, but didn't think the police would let her.

She went back to Maureen and put her arm around her shoulder. "It looks bad, but I think it's all cosmetic. It's all fixable." Maureen leaned into her for a moment then turned her gaze to the house.

All of the visible windows were broken, the porch light had been torn down and the potted plant garden on Maureen's porch was a mess of dirt and pottery shards. "My poor plants," Maureen said sadly. "I have to do something with them or they'll die."

"I'll help you," Shine offered.

"Excuse me," a man's tenor voice said behind them. "Mrs. Baird?"

Maureen didn't even look at him. "Ms."

"Ms. Baird," he corrected himself. "Are you just now arriving home?"

"We were at the fireworks show."

"Can you tell me what time you left?"

Maureen glanced at Shine and turned to face him. "I haven't been home since 2:30 this morning. We were out all day."

He wrote quickly and looked at Shine. "And you are?"

"Shine Avery."

"Any idea who could have done this?"

Maureen sighed. "In all fairness, it could have been anyone, but I was battered last year and my abuser got out of jail on the first. I'm inclined to think this is her work."

He flipped to a new page and asked, "Her name?"

"Bethany Danielle Cox." Maureen waited for him to finish writing. "Can I do something with my plants?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait," he said. "We'll need you to look inside. It doesn't look like any damage was done to the inside of the house, but we'll need you to verify that."

He led them to the front door and waited for Maureen to pull out her keys and unlock it. Shine

noted that it would have been easier to just step through the broken front window.

Aside from glass everywhere, Shine couldn't see anything wrong with the living room. Nothing looked broken and everything that should be there was. Curious, she looked for what had broken the windows.

"Not rocks," she muttered to herself.

"Excuse me?" The officer asked.

"Whatever broke the windows doesn't appear to be in the house," she clarified.

He looked around himself and nodded. "A detective is on the way and he'll have a look around."

Maureen came back into the living room and came straight to Shine, snuggling under her arm. Shine squeezed her reassuringly.

"I don't think she came inside," she said without energy. "I don't see anything missing or broken."

The officer ushered them out of the house. "The detective needs to see an untouched scene. He's on his way and he'll want to talk to you. You're welcome to wait in one of the cruisers."

Shine led the way to the Lexus and leaned back against the car. Maureen slid into her arms automatically. "Are you okay?"

"No." Maureen started to cry. "I knew that she would do something. I *knew* it. I've been so terrified and now that she's done it, I just feel sick."

"At least you're okay. I'm just glad you weren't here when it happened."

"It's not over yet," she sobbed. "She's still out there."

Shine's heart was breaking at the anguish in Maureen's voice. "I'll protect you."

"It's not your job to protect me."

But I want to! Shine hunted for words that would make everything all right. "Then I'll watch your back and we'll protect each other."

"She's dangerous, Shine. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't, and neither will you," she said with as much conviction and faith as she could muster. "The police will find her and she'll go back to jail."

"We had such a good day and now this. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," Shine insisted. "If not for this, I'd be on my way home missing you. Instead, here I am, holding you."

Maureen tightened her hold with an involuntary laugh and Shine felt kisses on her throat. She rocked Maureen contentedly.

A familiar man in a suit made his way toward them and after a moment of thought she remembered meeting him in Jim and Carol's back yard at the Memorial Day barbecue. "I think the detective is here."

Maureen lifted her head and wiped at her tears. "Thank God, it's Carl." She released Shine and stepped to the big man for a hug.

"At least you're okay," he said gruffly. "Was it Beth?"

"I don't know, but it makes the most sense," Maureen answered.

"We'll start looking for her." Carl pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Maureen. "I need to go take a look at everything. Was she inside the house?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you have someplace to stay tonight?"

Shine spoke up eagerly. "She can stay at my place."

"It's Shine, right?"

"It's good to see you, Carl," Shine said as she took his hand. "It's always nice to see a friendly face when something like this happens."

"Carl," Maureen interjected, "my plants are going to die if I don't do something with them."

"Okay. Give me a few minutes and maybe I can let you move them."

Carl went to work and Maureen turned to Shine. "I can always get a motel room, you know. I can do this on my own."

"But...I *want* to be with you," Shine said in a weak voice.

"To protect me?"

Shine arranged her feelings quickly to understand them. "No, but I do have the urge to jump in

and try to fix everything for you. Twelve million is a pretty big stick, you know. But I'm not sure there's anything I *can* do and it would probably only make you mad." She took one of Maureen's cold hands and held it up to her cheek. "When I was skating this morning and you were in my house, sleeping in my bed; I don't think I've ever been so happy in my whole life. I'm offering you a place to stay because I *want* you there. It has nothing to do with this. You can even have the big room."

Maureen wiped her eyes with a smile. "Thanks, baby."

Shine helped Maureen gather the plants and place them throughout a flower patch in the back yard. Maureen told her that being amongst calm, healthy plants and in touch with the earth would help them. Shine didn't know if it was true, but it made Maureen feel better, so she pretended it made sense.

She waited in the car while Maureen went inside for some clothes and personal items. She watched her stop on the porch and talk to Carl, then hug him briefly.

"What did he say?" She asked as soon as Maureen was inside the car.

"He thinks it was Beth, too, but he's not sure he can prove it."

"I'm surprised that a *detective* was sent out on a simple vandalism call."

"My job makes me a public official. My address is flagged so that if it comes up, certain procedures are followed. They worry about stalkers and such."

Shine drove carefully, watching to be sure that they weren't followed and not entirely sure if she would be able to tell if she was. She felt a little silly, but couldn't stop.

Once home, Maureen took a shower. Wishing she had a bottle of wine to offer, Shine searched her kitchen for comfort food. She grinned at a pint of double chocolate chunk ice cream and took it into the bedroom with a spoon. When Maureen came out in a T-shirt and underwear, Shine kissed her and went in to take her own shower.

She came out in pajamas to find Maureen sitting in the middle of the large bed eating ice cream. "I really needed this," Maureen said gratefully.

Sitting behind her, Shine began massaging her shoulders. The ice cream temporarily forgotten, Maureen's head fell forward with a groan. Taking her time, Shine worked the muscles from neck to lower back.

When her hands were tired, she brushed Maureen's shoulder-length hair to the side and kissed her neck. Maureen lay back against her.

"That felt wonderful."

"Do you need to cry?" Shine asked.

"I may later," she said as she scooped out another bite of ice cream, "but right now I'm in heaven."

Shine impulsively wrapped her arms and legs around her from behind. Looking over Maureen's shoulder, she could see that her arms had pulled the T-shirt tight and large nipples were straining against the fabric. She kept her breathing even and slow, but her heart rate spiked. She couldn't take her eyes off of them and fought the desire to rub her fingers over them. She had no idea how Maureen would react.

"I'm glad you were there with me. It helped having you near."

"I just felt so bad for you; seeing everything all smashed up like that."

"My poor car," Maureen groaned.

"It could have been much worse. She could have set fire to everything."

"I didn't even think of that." Maureen wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands.

"I can fix your porch light if you want me to."

"Only if I get to watch." Maureen leaned her head back and rubbed her cheek on Shine's. "I like watching you work with your hands."

Shine warmed at the idea of what the words implied. "What about your car? Is it insured against this sort of thing?"

"I think so. I'll call the shop on Monday and have it picked up."

"You can drive my car till you get yours back."

"They'll give me a loaner, baby, but thanks for the offer."

"I've got my old truck, Maureen. I *want* you to drive my car: it'll be kind of like letting you borrow clothes. Sort of erotic."

"You want me to wear your car?" Maureen chuckled.

Shine lowered her voice to a husky growl. "Makes me hot just thinking about it."

Maureen laughed and it turned into a yawn. "I wish I wasn't so tired."

"I should probably let you get some sleep." This was the last thing Shine wanted. "There will be a lot to do tomorrow."

"I guess you're right."

Shine checked doors and windows more for Maureen's benefit than her own. As she turned off the last of the lights, Maureen took her hand.

"I want you to sleep by me," she said. "I don't want to be alone."

Shine's awakening passion transformed into tenderness. She let Maureen take her to bed and felt her relax as she curled into her back.

"You're safe," she whispered. "Go to sleep."

Maureen woke softly in the dark, Shine's steady breath on the back of her neck. She concentrated on the feeling of Shine's body pressed tightly against her own. She wondered how it was that she could feel so cradled by a woman so much thinner. She felt completely safe, completely warm.

Shine's arm was around her waist and Maureen slowly picked up her hand. Moving slowly, she lifted the long, slender fingers to her lips for a kiss. Without thinking about whether it was wise, she placed Shine's hand over her breast. Holding it there, she drifted back to sleep.

She woke again, rested, and her first awareness was the hand she held to her breast. Her second was Shine's body held tensely in place behind her.

"Good morning, baby."

Shine's arm stiffened. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"You didn't, Shine. I did." Maureen slowly lifted the hand to her lips. "I couldn't help it. I just wanted to feel you there for a few minutes, but I fell asleep."

"I thought maybe I..."

Maureen thought that Shine sounded almost disappointed and she leaned back into her so she could see her face. "Even if you did, it would be okay. You know that don't you?"

Shine raised herself onto an elbow and stared down at her. "I do want to, but I'm afraid to follow through."

"I know." Maureen decided it was time to apply a little more pressure. She lifted her T-shirt and guided Shine's hand to her breast. "Don't be afraid to touch me, Shine. I'll stop you before it becomes too much."

"Are you sure?"

She slipped an arm around Shine's back and put her free arm under her head. "I torment you relentlessly. Let's call this payback."

Shine held her breath and pushed Maureen's T-shirt up to expose her breasts.

"Tell me about Reggie," Maureen said desperately as Shine's fingers trailed over the tops of her breasts.

Carol was livid and Shine couldn't quit grinning about it. She had wanted to act the same way, but watching Carol made it seem silly. Carol cursed and muttered constantly and Shine knew that wherever Beth was, there was an ominous crackle in the air.

"What are you smiling about?" Maureen asked from where she was sweeping up broken pottery.

"Carol." Shine said in a whisper. "I'm glad she's here. I don't feel like I have to be upset because she's doing such a good job of it."

"She'll calm down in a bit. She just needs to blow off steam."

"What about you?" Shine walked over and laid her hand on Maureen's back. "Are you doing okay?"

"I feel pretty good. I keep hearing what you said last night about all of this being superficial damage. You were right. She could have done a lot worse. I hope she feels better now and can move on."

"I feel sorry for her."

"Why?"

"She's lost you. That's got to be worse than jail."

Maureen gave Shine a one-armed hug. "Thanks for saying that."

"Do I have to do everything myself?" Carol grumbled from inside.

"Are you volunteering?" Maureen laughed.

"Hell no!" Carol stepped through the open window. "What are you two so cheerful about?"

"We were talking about you," Maureen said. "You're cute when you're mad."

Carol arched an eyebrow. "I'll show you cute if you don't get back to work."

Shine ducked her head with a grin and followed orders. In no time, all of the glass had been collected and discarded and they stapled heavy black plastic over the windows. Maureen went inside to make phone calls and Shine began sweeping around the demolished car. Curious, she pulled the hood release and checked the engine to make sure it hadn't been harmed. She didn't know very much about motors beyond basic maintenance, but it all looked to be in good order. There were no fluid puddles under the car either. Relieved for Maureen, Shine finished cleaning up and went back inside.

Maureen was still on the phone and Carol was sitting at the kitchen counter with a beer. Shine sat down at the dining room table and listened.

"...Plastic on the windows, so it's as safe as possible...The police are all but camped out in the front yard, Stan...Don't worry about that...I'm staying with my girlfriend..."

Shine smiled at her words.

"Do you want a beer?" Carol asked from the kitchen.

"I don't drink, but thanks."

"That's right. I remember now." Carol joined her at the table. "Why not?"

"Penance, of a sort. Jim didn't tell you about my past, did he?"

"No. And I tried."

Shine felt easier about talking of it, but after watching Carol's upset over the vandalism, she wasn't sure that speaking up was a good idea. After a moment's hesitation, she decided it was the right thing to do. She gave Carol the 25-words-or-less version and waited for the explosion.

Carol's eyes narrowed in thought. "Was she suicidal before?"

"Not that I was aware of."

"Did she leave a note?"

"If she did, I never saw it."

Carol sat back in her chair and took a long drink of her beer and her eyes never left Shine. She leaned forward intently and set the bottle on the table. "Two things I have to say. First, she killed

herself to get revenge, not because she couldn't live with what you did. She did it for no other reason than to hurt you and you fell for it. If you think anything else, you're a fool. Second: if you cheat on Maureen, I swear to God I'll tear your heart out. I'll hunt you down and break every bone in your body. There won't be anyplace you can hide that I can't find you...Do you think this is funny?"

Shine reached out and took her hand. "You're the first person to focus on the fact that what I did was wrong. Everyone else keeps telling me it wasn't my fault: like I had nothing to do with it. But I did. Thank you for that."

"I mean it, Shine. If you hurt her..."

"If I hurt her, you'll be doing me a favor."

Maureen's hand fell on her shoulder. "What favor?"

"We're just talking about how to keep you from getting hurt," Carol said as she picked up her beer.

"And you think you're the women to do the job?"

Shine smiled up at her. "Between the two of us, I think we can handle it." She looked back to Carol and saw her nodding in amused agreement.

When they got back to her house it was late afternoon and Shine gave Maureen the keys to her Lexus. Going out to the garage, Shine began checking out her old truck. It had been sitting almost undisturbed for four years. She checked the charge on the battery and reattached the cables first, then changed the oil and checked the other fluids. Crossing her fingers she turned the key and gave it some gas. Reluctantly, it started up. Shine nursed it for a few minutes, and then let it idle. Starting up her air compressor, she re-inflated the tires and removed the jack stands. Feeling as though she had accomplished more than she had, Shine shut off the engine and went inside to wash up.

The house was completely quiet. She looked around and realized that Maureen wasn't there. *Well, I did give her a car. I didn't stipulate that she couldn't use it without telling me first.* Shine shook her head and worked at getting the grease and dirt out of her nails.

The house just didn't seem right with Maureen gone. She wandered aimlessly for a while, and then kicked herself for being pitiful. Shine grabbed a towel and went out to the deck. Tossing her clothes in a pile, she sank into the tub briefly then got out and sat on the edge. Of all the sensual delights in the world, being naked outside was in Shine's top five. The other four might change, but this one thing was consistently on the list and since Maureen had come into her life it had become even more sensual than before.

She might joke about buying her house because it had a hot tub, but it was close to the truth. The curve of the street she lived on, the geography and an eight-foot fence gave Shine a yard twice the size of a basketball court that no one could see into. The first day she had lived there she had gone over every inch of the fence and checked it for holes. She had complete privacy in her yard and she valued it more than any other feature of the house.

Leaning back on her elbows with her legs in the water, Shine let the late afternoon sun dry her. An occasional breeze tickled the tiny, almost invisible hairs on her belly and breasts and her nipples tightened in response. If they had ever done this before, Shine had not been conscious of it. She relaxed into the sensation, feeling as though invisible hands were caressing her. She let herself imagine Maureen causing the arousal she was experiencing.

Hearing Maureen in the house calling her name, she quickly slid into the water. To her surprise, she felt the desire to be seen and the stronger it got, the more she wished she could hide.

"There you are!" Maureen came out of the kitchen door. "I went out and bought some groceries. And I brought you this!" She brought her hand from behind her back and held out a pink rose.

"You brought me a flower?" Shine couldn't clearly remember the last time she had been given a flower. She took it from Maureen's hand and brought it to her nose. The scent was surprisingly delicate and Shine drew the fragrance in. "Remind me to kiss you later."

Maureen knelt down and leaned over her. "I can't wait. Kiss me now."

Shine stretched up to kiss her and Maureen pulled back just out of reach.

"Come on," Maureen teased. "Don't you want to kiss me?"

Knowing she was being provoked into showing off her body, Shine lifted herself out of the water to sit on the side again and took Maureen's face in her hands. She gave her a kiss worthy of a rose and Maureen got up with a smile. "I stopped by work, so I've got some paperwork to do. Shake me when you come in?"

Shine nodded happily and leaned back on her elbows. She knew Maureen was watching her from inside and it made her feel beautiful to know that she enjoyed looking. She found it extremely erotic to lie in the sun and speculate what part of her body Maureen was studying at any given moment.

Maureen couldn't sleep and it wasn't anxiety over Beth that kept her awake. It was amazing to her that only three nights sleeping next to Shine would so disrupt her routine. Every time she reached the edge of sleep, she would jolt awake. She had been surprised and more than a little disappointed that the glaziers had been able to fit her in so quickly and she wondered if Shine or Carl had engineered it.

Rolling over, she checked the clock and watched it change from 1:38 to 1:39. The phone tempted her and she wondered what Shine would think about getting a call in the middle of the night. Maureen gave in to the impulse and pulled the phone onto the bed. Shine answered on the first ring.

"Maureen?"

"I can't sleep," Maureen said.

"Me neither," Shine's voice lost its edge.

"I miss you."

"Should I come over?"

"No," Maureen said reluctantly. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Put your phone on speaker. Then we can hear each other and maybe get some sleep."

Maureen laughed. "I'm 42 years old, baby. What would people say?"

"Don't tell them. I won't."

The quality of sound on the phone changed and Maureen knew that Shine had done it. She followed suit. "I feel silly," she laughed. "Like I'm 12 years old."

"I don't care if it's silly. I feel better being able to hear you."

"Thank you, Shine."

"Get some sleep."

The alarm went off and Maureen reached out to turn it off. She lay back and heard a clatter through the open phone line.

"Oh, yeah," she heard Shine say groggily.

"Good morning, baby."

She heard the little mewling noise Shine made when she stretched in the morning. "Good morning, Maureen. Was it good for you?"

With a chuckle, Maureen snuggled back into her bed and laid a hand on the phone. "You were great, lover. But I wish I was there with you; holding you, listening to you breathe, smelling your

hair."

"I never thought I'd be able to sleep with someone in my bed, but now it almost hurts that you're not here."

"Maybe this weekend?" Maureen asked hopefully.

"Can I come there?"

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable in your bed?"

"It's you that makes it comfortable. And I want to be in your bed. I want to feel surrounded by you."

Maureen shivered at the thought. "Do you have any idea what you do to me when you say things like that?"

Shine sounded uncertain. "Was that wrong?"

"Oh, no. It was very right. Almost too right."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"I feel like it's...inevitable that we're going to make love. I may not know when, but I know we will. Do you feel like that?"

"Yes, baby." *It's almost the only thing I ever think about anymore.*

"Am I the only reason we're waiting?"

"I thought so at first, but not now."

"Then why?"

Maureen worked it out in her head and wondered if she should explain.

"Tell me." Shine said gently.

"I'm tired of having lovers. They never turn out to be my friends. I'm hoping that being friends first will make a difference. Maybe that way we'll be more than lovers. Maybe we'll be family."

"You want to be my family?"

"I'm hoping we'll discover that we *are* family." She listened to the empty hiss of the connection.

"Does that scare you?"

"No," Shine said carefully.

"Is that something that you might want?"

"I didn't know what I wanted until I met you. Now I'm thinking of all kinds of things I want."

"Such as?"

"I'm going to start sleeping in the big room. And I think it's time to retire the truck. I want something more reliable."

"Are you having trouble with it? Maybe you should take back your car."

Shine sighed into the phone. "Fine. I want something that looks cool. The truck belongs in a museum and the air conditioner doesn't work."

Maureen grinned. "What else do you want?"

"Besides you? I want to decorate the house and the back deck. I was thinking about having a barbecue with Jim and Carol and the kids, but I need all kinds of things. Will you help me?"

"*Sure*. I'll help you shop."

"Great, because I'm not good at making things look like Martha Stewart. You are. Plus, it'll be fun."

"Today's Wednesday, you know." Maureen stretched in anticipation of getting up. "I won't get off work till 8. Are you going to invite me to dinner tonight?"

"Would you like to come to dinner this evening?"

"I'd love to. You're so sweet to ask."

TEN

Shine had not known that car racing could be so much fun. In spite of all her travels and

adventures, she had never been to a racetrack before. As it turned out, watching it on TV was a poor substitute for the real thing. Edgewater's track was only a quarter mile, but she couldn't believe how *fast* they were going. And loud! Her ears would recover, but she wasn't sure about her voice. She had started screaming on the first lap along with everyone else and couldn't quit.

Maureen had pointed out a car, #47, right away and mentioned that the husband of one of her employees was in the pit crew. The driver had turned out to be quite good and it was better, she decided, to have a specific car to cheer for.

"I have to go to the bathroom!" She yelled in Maureen's ear.

"Bring me another beer?"

Shine nodded and turned to leave. A hand made itself very familiar with her ass and she spun to see Maureen's grin. Shaking a finger, she backed away. Everyone seemed to be standing, so she ended up walking along their seats.

Dropping to the ground, she located the bathrooms. They were foul and she almost changed her mind, but her need was great. She came out of what passed for a stall and went to the sink to wash her hands. Someone else entered the small room and Shine straightened to give her room.

Pain exploded in her back beneath her ribs and she slammed into the sink. Trying to grab the sink with wet hands to keep herself upright, she was struck again. Crying out, she banged her elbow painfully on her way to the floor.

"I don't know who you are, but Maureen is mine!" A woman screamed. "You stay away from her!"

Maureen? Shine tried to get up and pain blossomed in her hip. She looked around and saw the door swinging shut. *Beth!*

Fear for Maureen got her up and moving, but not well. She hurt in the joint of her hip and her back was on fire. Pulling the door open she staggered outside. She made about 10 yards before going to a knee to catch her breath. The pain under her ribs was intense.

"Hey," a woman's voice said above her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm hurt." Shine spoke as forcefully as she could. "I need security."

"Stay with her Tess," she heard. "I'll be right back."

Hands helped her to her feet and Shine got a look at an attractive woman in her mid 20's. She knew immediately that she was a lesbian. "My girlfriend," Shine gasped as she tried to straighten. "I think it was her stalker. I have to warn her."

"Wendy is getting security. They'll help."

"Please," Shine begged. "She could be in trouble. She did it before."

The young woman looked uncertain for a moment, then as though she had come to a decision.
"Tell me where she is."

Shine gave the best directions she could and a description of Maureen. Wendy came back while she was talking.

"Security's on the way."

"Will you be okay?" Tess asked.

"Just hurry."

Tess leaned close. "What's your name?"

"Shine."

"Don't worry," Tess said with a big smile. "We're family. We'll find her."

"Find who?" Wendy asked in confusion.

Tess took her hand. "Come on! I'll explain on the way."

Shine dropped back down to bend over her knees and tried not to cry.

Maureen was cheering a particularly tricky pass by car #47 when a young woman grabbed her arm unexpectedly.

"Are you Maureen?" She yelled.

"Do I know you?"

"Shine sent us to find you! Something happened!"

"Is she all right?" Maureen grabbed their blanket in gut-wrenching panic. "Where is she?"

"I think she got mugged! She's with Security!"

Maureen followed her and they joined another young woman in the aisle. She wanted to knock people down and run over the top of them to get to Shine. The roar of the cars and the crowd had stopped being fun and was just exasperating. Once they got to the ground the going was much quicker. She saw Shine sitting on a bench talking to a security guard and began to run. Shine saw

her and lurched to her feet.

Maureen didn't know if she should hug her or not. She looked okay, but was standing as if she weren't. Shine decided for her with a desperate embrace.

"What happened?" She asked into Shine's ear.

"I was so scared for you. I never even saw her and I didn't know where she went after she hit me and all I could think of was you, up in the stands, unprotected. I tried to come, Maureen."

"It's okay, baby. I'm here. Tell me what happened."

"I think it was Beth."

Maureen wanted to rip her own heart out and offer it to Shine. It was one thing to tear up her house and car, but to hurt Shine? "Do you need a doctor?"

"I don't think so." Shine reached around her and held her hand out. "Hey, you two. Thanks."

Maureen nodded when appropriate at the introductions, but didn't hear a word. Shine was leaning heavily against her and having a hard time standing up straight. Maureen could see sweat on her temple, but the evening was cool. "You're hurt, Shine. You need a doctor."

"I need an ice pack. Please, just take me to your house."

Since Shine hadn't been robbed and she had not seen her attacker, there wasn't much the security guard could do but write up an incident report. Maureen informed him that Carl would be requesting a copy and asked him to escort them to Shine's car.

She made Shine tell the entire story as she drove, grilling her on specifics. In the end, she had to agree that Beth was the most likely candidate. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, she still couldn't believe that a woman would behave in such a fashion. Lesbians just didn't get violent, did they?

Shine walked into the house under her own power. She moved slowly, but she stood tall and straight. Maureen hoped that this was an indication that she really was okay. After locking up the house, Maureen went to her bedroom to find Shine lying curled up on one side with her eyes closed.

"Take off your clothes, baby."

"Not tonight, dear. I have a headache."

"Ha ha. Very funny," she said dryly. She started with Shine's feet, removing shoes and socks. "Come on, Shine. I want to see what she did to you. I have a right."

Shine backed carefully off the bed and stood up. Maureen had to help her remove almost everything. Shine couldn't bend over, lift her left arm or pick her right foot off the ground without a grimace. Naked, Maureen let her lay down again.

"How does it look?" Shine asked.

Guilt and regret made it easy not to notice anything but Shine's injuries. "Your hip is already turning black. You say she kicked you?"

"I was on the floor so it must have been a kick. It's right on the joint and it *hurts*."

Maureen turned her over and ran a hand over her kidney. "This looks red, but not much. How painful is it?"

"Like a cramp. It's not so bad if I don't move or stretch."

Desperately hoping she wasn't, Maureen asked, "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Shine rolled onto her back and held up an arm. "My elbow is killing me."

Maureen couldn't see anything wrong with her arm and said so. Throwing the comforter over her, she went to the kitchen for an ice pack and grabbed a heating pad out of the hall closet on the way back. She got Shine set up with ice on her hip and the heating pad on her back, then made her take some aspirin. She didn't know anything about doctoring, but she didn't think letting Shine's kidneys freeze was a good idea. Having made her as comfortable as possible, she curled up next to her.

"I'm sorry, Shine."

"It's not your fault, hon."

"My ex-girlfriend beat you up." Maureen felt so dreadful she couldn't even cry. "Maybe it's not my fault, but I still feel bad about it."

"Better me than you." Shine lay still and quiet with her eyes closed.

Maureen's heart tightened painfully in her chest. "How can you say that?"

"This would hurt me a lot worse if it were you."

Nothing Shine was saying was making her feel better. "If I had never been with her you wouldn't be hurt at all. How could I have misjudged her so badly?"

"Maybe you didn't. Maybe she lied to you."

"That just makes me gullible."

"It makes you trusting. That's not a bad thing." Shine moved the ice pack and slowly rolled to her side and sat up. "If it's okay with you, I want to take a shower. The bathroom at the track was gross."

Maureen got the bed ready for sleeping and put one of her T-shirts on the bathroom counter for when Shine came out.

Maureen woke with a start. The bed next to her was empty. Reaching out, she ran her hand over where Shine had been and found it still warm. Rolling over, she saw the bathroom door was closed. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear water running in the bathroom sink. *If she's up and about, she's okay.* Relieved, Maureen relaxed, but she still felt responsible that Shine had been hurt at all.

Shine came out with a cheery smile and a marked limp. "I was hoping you would wake up soon." She crawled slowly onto the bed and sat on Maureen's legs. "What are we going to do today?"

Maureen forced herself to grin and slid her hands up Shine's thighs. "First, I want to fool around a bit..."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Shine shivered.

"...And then I need to go to Rawley for a delivery and you're going to rest and get well. When I get back..."

"I'll come with you," Shine said firmly.

"Not this time, baby. You'll stiffen up in the car and be no good to me later."

Shine's face was stern. "And if she follows you?"

"I'll take my cell phone. It'll only take about 2 hours. I'll be fine."

"I don't like it," Shine said stubbornly.

"Do you like this?" Maureen slid her hands up Shine's belly, up over her ribs and around her back. Shine gasped and collapsed onto her. Maureen rubbed her back softly from neck to ass and Shine groaned.

"Not fair."

"Should I stop?"

Shine grabbed her face with both hands and kissed her.

Shine waited for the bathroom door to close before rolling carefully across the bed to pick up Maureen's phone. As soon as the shower started, she dialed.

"Hello?"

"Carol, it's Shine."

"Hi! What's up?"

"Maureen needs a favor and won't admit it."

"What's going on?"

"The short version is that I got hurt last night at the race track. I'm fine, but Maureen thinks I'm too sore to go with her to Rawley today. I'm afraid for her to go alone. Can you go with her? I'd love to have your kids over."

"How bad are you hurt?"

"Just a limp. Really, Carol. If I didn't think I could watch your kids safely, I wouldn't volunteer."

"Why are you afraid for her to go to Rawley?"

"It was Beth."

"Beth attacked you?"

"Yes. Will you go with her?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Have the kids bring swim suits. I've got everything else they need." Shine gave Carol directions to her house and hung up. Pleased with herself, she put her hands behind her head and wondered what kind of punishment Maureen would give her for sidestepping her wishes.

At home an hour later, Shine let Maureen help her to her couch. She checked the time and hoped Carol would arrive soon. She wasn't sure how long she could stall her. "Would you mind getting me a blanket from my room? And a pillow? In case I want to take a nap."

"Sure, baby."

"And maybe something to drink, if you don't mind?"

Maureen smoothed her hair back lovingly. "I don't mind at all, Shine."

Whatever she does to me, Shine thought as Maureen went down the hall, *I deserve it for faking that I'm hurt worse than I am*. She hid a smile behind her hand. *I hope it's awful*. She let Maureen fuss over her and was relieved when her funky doorbell finally rang. "Remind me to change that bell, okay?"

Maureen looked startled. "Maybe it's Carl."

"It's Carol and the kids."

Maureen stopped halfway across the room and looked over at her. "And you know this because...?"

Shine tried not to smile in anticipation. "I called her and asked her to go with you while you were showering."

"Why?" Maureen's hands went to her hips in indignation.

"You didn't say that *she* couldn't go." The doorbell thunked again. "Are you going to let her in?"

Maureen glared at her. "This discussion is *not* over." She pulled the door open to see Carol holding a squirming Colin.

"It's about time," Carol complained.

Maureen snorted. "Since you're here, come on in."

Shine shrugged at the look Carol gave her and stood up. "Hey, guys! Come on in! Did you bring your suits?"

"Do you have a pool?" Travis' eyes were wide.

"Maureen says I have the biggest hot tub in town. Go check it out. Just don't get in it until I'm with you!" She called to their backs.

"So what happened?" Carol asked with concern.

"It's no big deal," Shine reassured her. "I've just got a bruise on my hip."

"Excuse me, Carol." Maureen took Shine's hand. "I need to talk to Shine for a moment."

"Just make yourself at home," Shine called as she was pulled to the master bedroom.

Maureen closed the bedroom door and pushed her roughly onto the king-size bed. "I'm a grown woman, Shine," she said angrily. "I can take care of myself and I don't need you going behind my back making decisions for me. It's disrespectful and it's..."

"How did she know who I was?"

"...Condescending." Maureen hesitated. "What?"

Shine raised herself up on her elbows. "How did she know who I was?"

Comprehension flitted across Maureen's face. "She's watching us."

The fear in her eyes was too much for Shine. She reached out and pulled Maureen into her arms. "She didn't know my name. Maybe it was a coincidence that she saw us at the racetrack and she just followed me. But if she *is* following us, I don't want you to be alone on the highway. I don't want to control you, hon. I just want you to take some extra care until they catch her. It would break my heart if she hurt you."

"How do you think I feel?" Maureen's voice was ragged and hard. "She *did* hurt you and she did it because of me."

"Are you responsible for *everything* she does? Or just when she's bad? She's a psychopath and it has *nothing* to do with you." Shine rolled Maureen to her back and pinned her to the bed. "I'm not hurt. It's just a bruise and it'll be gone in a couple of days." She smiled into Maureen's hurt eyes. "Kiss me and promise to torment me later for going behind your back. Then go with Carol and spend some time with her. I'm sure she feels neglected lately."

Maureen told the entire story while she drove. Carol asked about Shine's injuries and then stared out the window in silence.

"Something has to be done about Beth," she finally said grimly.

"The police are already looking for her. She went to her first probation meeting, but she didn't go back after my house got trashed. When they *do* find her, she'll go right back to jail."

"Well, that's good news. How does Shine feel about what happened?"

"She's glad it was her and not me. She doesn't seem to be upset at all."

"You are though. I can tell."

"Of course, I am!" Maureen exclaimed. Tears of frustrated heartache blurred her vision and she pulled to the side of the road. "I was upset when she wrecked my car and my house, but this is different." Carol's hand rubbed her back as she cried. "I thought I was going to die when she hurt

me, but the worst pain was in my heart. I felt so violated and betrayed. It just didn't seem to be possible, even when it was happening. But this-seeing Shine bruised and hurting-this is so much worse."

"Beth is nuts, but she's not stupid, Maureen. She knows that the best way to hurt you is to hurt what you love."

Maureen reached for her purse to get a tissue. "How do I fight that?"

"You don't need to. Sooner or later she'll make a mistake. She's putting out all kinds of bad karma and pretty soon it'll all come right back in her face. Just love Shine and let her love you and Beth will get what she deserves."

"And how do I keep Shine safe until Beth's back in jail? I don't think I can take it if she gets hurt again, Carol."

"She's safe at work. Stay with her when she's not. But don't let the fear of Beth stop you from living your lives. If she *is* following you, being in public is a safe place to be and it may help to draw her out."

"How could I have been so foolish, Carol?" Maureen wiped away tears. "I slept with that woman, let her live in my house and run my life. How could I have let that happen?"

"She fooled us, too. Remember?" Carol put a hand in Maureen's hair. "I let her play with *my* kids. That's why it was such a shock when she started telling us all those lies."

"You know what I keep wondering?" Maureen sniffled. "How can I trust my judgement? Look at what happened with Beth. I *love* Shine, Carol: in ways I've never loved *anyone* before. But how can I trust that I'm really seeing who she is? How can I be sure that she won't end up being just like Beth?"

"Don't you see, Maureen? This is what Beth wants! She wants you to doubt yourself and let it ruin your relationship with Shine. Then you and Beth can be unhappy together and she can step in and promise to make it all better."

Anger flared up and Maureen spoke with her teeth clenched. "I would *never* take Beth back."

"If you lose Shine because of your fear, Beth will be in your heart whether she's in your bed or not."

Maureen jerked with shock and began to laugh. "How do you do that? How do you make everything come so clear?"

"Luck, mostly." Carol polished her knuckles on her chest. "So, tell me about Shine."

Maureen blushed. "I think she's *The One*."

"I hope so. You deserve it." Carol gave her a sly look. "Is she good in bed?"

"Carol!" Maureen protested.

"I told you about Jim."

Maureen laughed in remembrance. "And I begged you to stop."

"Please, Maureen?" She whined.

Maureen gave in. "We've slept together a couple of times, but we haven't made love yet."

"Why not?"

Maureen started the car back up and pulled into traffic. "She's been celibate for almost 9 years, you know. I think she needs time to feel safe and comfortable with her feelings."

"She looks safe and comfortable to me. I don't understand why you're still waiting."

"She's close, Carol, but she's being forced to abandon her conviction that the world is a better place when she's alone. She honestly believed it was best for everyone that she not even have friends. In order to be with me she has to change her fundamental belief that she's evil and destructive. That takes time." Maureen smiled fondly. "I'm proud of her. She's come so far. I can wait for her to come the rest of the way."

"If she's so close, why don't you just make love to her? Tip her over the edge yourself."

"Don't think I'm not tempted," Maureen laughed. "I could do it and she would probably thank me."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Two reasons. First, I've pushed and shoved and manipulated her to this point. Every step she's taken has been forced. I want the last step to be her choice. If she doesn't choose-if I choose for her-there will always be seeds of doubt and resentment in her heart. If we're going to have a chance, she has to be involved with her whole being."

Carol folded her arms with a sigh. "Okay. You're absolutely right. What's the second reason?"

Maureen felt her blush deepen. "You know how it is when you want to make love but you can't because you're in a public place? So you content yourself with glances and discreet touches, knowing that as soon as you're alone together you'll have a sexual meltdown?"

"Do I ever! I think that's the primary function of children. If either one of us starts to feel even the slightest bit frisky, the kids are suddenly all over us. It's like some sort of genetic radar

designed to prevent parents from reproducing again and taking resources away from the existing children. Jim and I have learned to bypass foreplay altogether. We go straight from anticipation to intercourse."

Maureen giggled helplessly.

"It's *not* funny," Carol said sternly. "Even Jim is complaining."

Maureen forced herself to stop laughing, but she couldn't hide the smile. "I'm sorry your sex life is so unsatisfying."

"At least I'm getting some," Carol preened. "Don't you two fool around even a little bit?"

"Well, yes."

"And?"

Maureen couldn't look at Carol. "She's an unbelievable kisser."

"Details, Maureen!"

"I can't describe it!" She protested. "She's taught me more about kissing than I learned in my entire life."

"Sounds yummy."

"She is," Maureen said proudly.

"What's the deal with that house? I didn't get to see much of it, but even the bit I did see was lavish. She *does* have money, doesn't she?"

"Without being specific, yes."

"Damn! She's beautiful, smart, funny, rich and she kisses like a goddess. Does she have a brother?"

"No. She's an orphan like me." Maureen suddenly had a thought. "She says she has a cousin somewhere. I wonder..."

"What are you thinking?"

"Shine still misses her. She talks about her all the time. What if I could find her? Most of what the reference desk does is genealogy. I'll bet Sandi could track her down. She's a wiz at this sort of thing."

"How did Shine lose track of her?"

"I don't know."

"I'd find out before I accidentally stirred up a hornet's nest."

Maureen suddenly realized that she felt much better than she had even thirty minutes ago. "I really needed this, Carol. Thanks for coming with me."

"Wild horses, sis."

"I hope Shine isn't mad at us for taking so long."

Maureen hoped so, too, but didn't say anything. She unlocked the door and stepped inside. Travis and Angela were playing a video game on the TV with Mabel sitting between them. It looked like the dog was watching the game and she wished she had a camera. The kids scarcely looked up to acknowledge their arrival.

Games were scattered on the floor and she wondered where they had come from. Lunch was a mess on the coffee table and on the other side of it, Shine and Colin lay asleep on the couch. Shine lay on her back with one arm over Colin protectively, his thumb hanging loosely from his mouth. Maureen wondered if she had ever seen anything so tender.

"I think Colin is in love," Carol whispered.

"Me, too." Unwilling to wake Shine just yet, she went into the kitchen for a glass of water.

"Is that the dog you were talking about?" Carol asked quietly.

"Yeah. She used to carry it from room to room and I was a little concerned, but now it stays in the living room most of the time."

Carol sat on a stool at the bar. "If I had to guess, I'd say she was practicing caring about something. That, and this is a big house and maybe it made her feel not so lonely."

"Do you think so?" Maureen hoped she was right.

"Kids use surrogates all the time. It's something she can care about and not risk being hurt by it. If she's not using it so much any more, maybe she was using it to heal herself."

"She still talks to it sometimes."

"Well, look at it, Maureen. It's adorable! How can you *not* want to talk to it?"

Her worries over Shine's attachment to the dog lessened and she considered getting it a toy. She

thought Shine might get a kick out of it.

Carol went to Travis and Angela, telling them quietly to get their things together.

Maureen crouched next to Shine and smoothed hair away from her face. Her blue eyes came open instantly in surprise and alarm, then eased into pleasure.

"Hey," she said with a soft yawn. "How long have you been back?"

"Only a minute. How was your day?"

"It was a *blast*." She stretched and then put her hands in Colin's flaming hair. "Hey little man," she said as Colin stirred. "Your mama's here." Colin stretched and rubbed his face between Shine's breasts before looking for his mother. Even when he spotted her he continued to lie happily on Shine.

Maureen wanted to hold them both in her arms. She turned and began cleaning lunch debris from the coffee table so that Shine would not see her longing.

"How were they?" Carol asked Shine.

"*Horrible!*" Shine grumbled. "They're *terrible* children! They're not much better than animals! I don't know how you put up with them! You ought to give them to the circus-I hear *they're* looking for freaks."

Maureen straightened in astonishment at the words. Travis and Angela leapt on Shine to tickle her and the couch turned into a tangled mess of arms, legs and shrieking laughter.

"Travis bit me!" Shine yelped.

"Did not!"

"Save me, Angela! Save me!"

Carol eventually got everyone sorted out. Maureen sat on the back of the couch with a hand on Shine's shoulder and waved good-bye as Carol herded her pack out the front door.

As the door closed, Shine reached back and pulled Maureen into her lap.

"Be careful!" Maureen warned.

"There's nothing wrong with me that holding you won't fix," Shine said into her neck. "Did you have a good time?"

"I feel much better, thank you."

"Did you miss me as much as I missed you?"

"Yes." Maureen placed a hand over Shine's heart and nibbled her ear. "What does it feel like when you miss me?"

"I ache and my chest feels empty."

"It's still early," she whispered. "What should we do today?"

Shine rolled her head around, allowing Maureen to kiss her throat. "I must be completely insane."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm thinking about shopping."

Maureen should have felt disappointed, but she didn't. "Do you want to start with the deck or the living room?"

"Living room."

"How much money do you want to spend?"

Shine laughed. "I don't care how much it costs. Let's just have fun!"

ELEVEN

Having spent the previous evening going over brochures and color swatches with Maureen, Shine was excited about the choices they had made. As much as possible she had agreed with Maureen's suggestions, but when forced to make her own decisions, she had tried to pick the things that Maureen had expressed the most pleasure in. The exceptions were to be the new TV and stereo. Maureen had flat out refused to have any say in what she should choose as Shine was the 'expert' in all things electronic.

Shine felt that her job today was merely to follow where Maureen led, pay for everything and make arrangements to have everything delivered to her home in the next several days. After the first few stores, merchants appeared to know that they were coming and were more than happy to

be of assistance. The best part of the whole experience was watching Maureen let her creative juices flow. Before they had visited too many stores, Maureen was making design decisions on her own. If Shine hated something she made a point of saying so, but by and large it was Maureen's taste that prevailed.

"How much have I spent?" Maureen asked sheepishly over lunch.

"I have no idea and I couldn't care less." Shine was having a great time. "You know that you have to help me arrange it all, right?"

"Are you even sure you're going to *like* any of this? I mean, it's *your* house and it seems like you're giving me free rein to decorate it to *my* taste."

"Let me ask you something." Shine put down her fork and leaned on her elbows. "If it *was* your house, is there anything we bought today that you wouldn't have bought for yourself?"

Maureen squinted in concentration. "I hate the easy chair and I'm not sure about that weird art deco floor lamp you like so much. I don't know how you're going to make it work with all of the other stuff you got."

Shine shrugged. "Beats me. I just like how it looks. So what if it doesn't work."

"Don't you have a picture in your head of how it should look?" Maureen seemed mystified.

"I can see how it all *fits* in the room, but I can't see how it will look or feel."

Shine picked up a toothpick and chewed on it. "The difference is that I know the little table you bought for between the windows isn't going to fit."

"It *will* fit and it'll be perfect. You'll see."

Shine *knew* she was right. She also didn't care. It was a beautiful little table and it would find a home somewhere in the house. What she *did* care about was the feeling that had been growing in her belly all day.

This is not just an infatuation or a sexual attraction. I love this woman! I can remember being in love with Reggie and Leah, but it was never anything like this. I am completely in love with Maureen. She is the best woman I've ever met. She's smart, sensitive, funny, gentle and so beautiful she makes my eyes hurt. She's the kind of woman you can count on to be there for the rest of your life, no matter what. When you make a commitment with a woman like Maureen, it's written in stone for eternity.

Do I deserve her? An image of Debra, cold and lifeless, slammed into her and she gasped at the pain in her chest.

"Shine? Are you all right?"

She looked into Maureen's concerned eyes and remembered what Carol had said. *She just did it to hurt you and you fell for it.* Between one heartbeat and the next, Shine was overwhelmed with rage.

"What's wrong, baby? You're as white as a sheet!"

All this time I've been killing myself over something that wasn't my fault! Yes! What I did was vicious and cruel and I deserved to be punished for it, but she deliberately did the one thing that would hurt me the most: the one thing I could never fix. She's no better than I was and I've been castigating myself for almost 9 years over her revenge. What I did was a spur of the moment act. She sat in my apartment for hours and planned it! I've been such a fool!

"Talk to me, Shine. What's happening?"

"I'm an idiot," Shine whispered. She was acutely conscious that they were sitting in a busy restaurant and put her face in her hands. "I can't believe how stupid I've been."

Maureen took one of her hands from her face and held it. "What do you mean?"

Shine didn't even know where to start. Wrath left her feeling vulnerable and she tilted her head back to concentrate on breathing herself back under control. When she felt calmer she squeezed Maureen's hand to let her know that she was better.

"What happened, Shine? I thought you were having a heart attack."

Taking a deep breath, she explained. "Carol said something to me. She said that Debra only killed herself to get revenge and that I was a fool for falling for it. She was right and I just now got it."

Maureen looked confused. "What brought that on?"

Shine's anger was still fresh and she ignored the question. "I've wasted the last nine years of my life. I've rambled around the country without purpose, pushing people away and risking my life to prove that I was still alive; but I wasn't! I was like a ghost in a graveyard, rattling chains of melancholy and self-loathing so I wouldn't have to face *life*. I not only wasted *my* life; I wasted the last years of my mother's life. How *dare* she kill herself!" It was an effort to keep her voice down. "What I did was wrong-it really was-but I did *not* deserve that."

"So now what?" Maureen asked casually. "Are you going to kick yourself around for being an idiot for another 8 or 9 years? You should tell me now if you are, because, frankly, I've got other plans."

Maureen's breezy indifference made all of her outrage vanish and Shine began to laugh. The tears that came now were jubilant and she did not try to hide them.

On the way to the home and garden shop, Maureen stopped suddenly outside a leather apparel store. "They don't sell patio furniture in there," Shine teased.

"I want you to buy me a jacket."

"Really?" Shine couldn't believe it. Of all the things she might have expected to buy Maureen, a leather jacket was not high on the list. "Of course. Get whatever you want." She followed Maureen inside. She liked the smell of leather and drew in a deep breath, but she didn't have a fetish for it.

"Try this one on," Maureen said as she held up a studded black jacket.

"But...I thought *you* wanted a jacket."

"I do," she said lightly. "But I want *you* to wear it."

Shine shrugged on the jacket. "You want *me* to buy *you* a jacket that *I'm* going to wear?"

"Hmm. I don't like how this one hangs on your shoulders. Take it off."

Shine tried on half a dozen jackets before Maureen found one she seemed to like. "This is the one I want."

"It's awfully butch," Shine said doubtfully as she looked in a mirror.

"Yes," Maureen said softly from over her shoulder. "It makes you look even more feminine."

Shine turned to face her. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Maureen's eyes studied her from head to toe. "It's *very sexy*."

Shine stopped breathing when Maureen's fingers slipped deep inside the waistband of her jeans and pulled her close.

"I want you to take me dancing on Friday night," Maureen said low and husky. "And I want you to wear this jacket."

Shine was riveted with desire.

"I also want you to wear those old jeans. You know the ones." Maureen's other hand slid around to cup her ass. "The ones that are torn right here?"

Shine nodded helplessly. Maureen's hand slowly moved up under her shirt and rubbed circles on her stomach.

"And one of those little T-shirts that leaves your belly exposed. Will you do that for me?"

Shine thought she might faint. "Anything you want."

Maureen leaned forward and Shine thought she was going to kiss her right there in the store.

"Then don't wear
a bra."

Shine didn't know whether to cry or come. Maureen smiled wickedly and left her there to pay for the jacket.

With a casserole in the oven timed to be ready when Maureen walked in the door, Shine relaxed in her new easy chair and admired the living room. Blues and greens predominated, but spots of purple were present in things like the vase over by the television and a runner on the entryway table. She lacked art on the walls yet, but the overall feeling was very comfortable. She smiled at the little table that *didn't* fit between the windows and wondered if she should have them rebuilt. She picked up the remote for the new stereo and figured out how to turn on the radio. The house didn't echo as much as it had, so the music was a nice complement.

Remembering Maureen's suggestion that she dig out old family photo's to fill in the empty spaces, Shine went out to the garage. All of the boxes she had taken from her childhood home-including the one she had pulled down for the kids with her old games in it-were tucked up in the rafters. It took a while to locate the one she wanted, but getting it down was easy from the hood of her truck. She carried it into the living room and set it on the spacious coffee table.

Opening the box was like dusting off old gravestones and it made her feel a little sad. She set the photo albums off to one side and focused first on the framed pictures. She was hugging the last family portrait that her dad had been in to her chest when Maureen let herself in. "I'm glad you're home. How was work?"

"Typical." Maureen dropped onto the couch, kicked off her shoes and picked up a baby picture. "Is this you?"

Shine nodded. "I was six months old."

Maureen put a hand to her heart. "Oh, my God. You were beautiful. Look at your little hands."

Shine smiled at the coo in Maureen's voice. "That was one of my dad's favorite pictures. He called me his little love child."

Maureen began to lovingly praise each of her infantile features and Shine got up to serve dinner. She came back with their plates a few minutes later and found Maureen studying the photo she had been hugging.

"I wish I had known your parents," Maureen said softly. "They look like good people. I can see you in their faces."

"They would have liked you very much," Shine admitted. She went back to the kitchen and brought a bottle of white wine and a glass for Maureen. "I don't know what you like, but the guy at the store promised that this is very good."

Maureen looked up in surprise. "For me? You didn't have to do this."

Shine poured her a glass and sat down to her food. "Just because I don't drink doesn't mean that you can't."

Maureen sat quietly holding her glass. "Are you an alcoholic?"

"I don't think so," Shine said honestly. "Except for at the end I didn't drink much at all. And afterwards, it was months before I realized that I had stopped."

"Do you think...did it happen because you'd been drinking?"

Shine thought it over. "It might make me feel better if I could say that it did, but I think not. It happened because I was unhappy-which I did to myself-and an opportunity presented itself to make things worse. It's like I forgot how to stop being miserable. I don't think alcohol had anything to do with it, except that maybe it made it harder for me to see my way clear."

"Are you tempted at all to have some of this with me?"

Shine closed her eyes and carefully sampled the air with her nose. "I can smell it." She opened her eyes. "It smells good, but aside from wanting to taste it in your kiss, no." She watched as Maureen slowly raised the glass to her lips and deliberately tasted it. "Is it good?"

Maureen drank again and reached for her. "Why don't you come over here and find out."

Shine went to her knees before her and let Maureen guide their mouths together. Opening her lips, she sucked Maureen's tongue into her mouth and tasted her thoroughly. When the kiss ended she asked, "Do you like cognac?"

Maureen traced her eyes with her fingertips. "Yes."

"I think that would taste good on you, too."

Maureen smiled. "I want to look at your baby pictures while we eat."

Shine showed her which album to start with and she explained the people and events as they finished dinner.

"I don't see any pictures of your cousin."

Shine reached for the overly decorated album with a pang of longing. "After the last time I saw her, Mom helped me put this together so I wouldn't forget." She ran her fingers over the glittering hearts on the cover, remembering the anguish only a 13-year-old girl can feel. The first pictures brought back a flood of memories. "Grace was a year and 2 days older than I. We were more like sisters than anything else."

"Was she born in San Francisco, too?"

"No. She was born in Monterey."

"She looks almost Asian."

Shine lovingly touched a picture of the two of them: her own light skin and hair next to Grace's dark. "Grace was born out of wedlock back when it was still scandalous and her mother would never say who her father was. There was speculation that Aunt Rose actually had sex, though she would never admit it. Dad always thought that the father must have been of Hawaiian/Japanese descent." Shine flipped to a portrait of Grace at age 8. "You can see she has some Asian features, but Dad said she carried her Hawaiian blood in her bone structure. I think he wanted me to be impressed that he could tell. I always figured it was Grace's middle name, Lanai, that gave it away."

"She's quite lovely. Was her last name Avery, too?"

"Yep." Shine flipped to the next page and the picture of Grace's broken arm with herself glowering over Grace's shoulder. Tapping the picture, she remembered with a laugh. "This was a really bad day. I was 9 and Grace was 10."

"What happened?"

"We were playing in a tree with a bunch of other kids and I was being teased about not liking boys. Grace started it, but every one was involved."

"You knew even then?"

"Oh yeah, I always knew. Anyway, she dared me to kiss Ricky...I forget his last name. Well, I never could turn down a dare, so I grabbed him and kissed him, then turned around and socked her in the stomach so hard she fell out of the tree and busted her arm."

Shine grinned as Maureen started to laugh. "I would have gotten away with it, but when my mom asked me if it was an accident, I stood right up and said, 'Hell, no! I was hoping she'd bust her stupid neck!' She whipped me good for that and washed my mouth out with soap. Then I had to do all of Grace's chores and carry her books to school until the cast came off. That was the last time I ever hit anybody."

Maureen hooked an arm around her neck and pulled her down to knuckle her head. That started a wrestling match and Shine ended up pinned face down on the floor with Maureen tickling her. "I give! I give!" Maureen laughed and Shine squealed as she got a wedgie. "That's not fair! You can't give a wedgie *after* the surrender!"

Maureen moved off of her and lay down on the rug next to her. "So sue me."

Shine rolled onto her back and with a single practiced flip, unbuttoned her jeans. Reaching inside, she lifted her hips from the floor and adjusted her underwear.

"I'll give you 20 bucks if you'll do that again."

"Gee," Shine said with a grin. "I might just give you 50 to make it necessary." She fixed the buttons and turned on her side to face Maureen.

"So what ever happened to Grace?" Maureen asked lazily. "How did you two get separated?"

Shine sighed. This memory had been painful for a long time, but the sweetness of it remained. "When I was 13, I was spending the night at Grace's house. She was all gaga over some boy in her class and was bragging about kissing him. She started high school that year and it was the first year we weren't in the same school together. I was feeling a little left out, so I started giving her a hard time about boys not knowing how to kiss to begin with so it couldn't have been that great and... Anyway, one thing led to another and I dared her to kiss a girl. I was the only one there, of course..."

Maureen's face broke out in a grin. "You are a *dog*, Shine Avery."

Shine ears ere burning. "Do you want to hear this story or not?"

"Go ahead, baby."

"Okay. So we started kissing-just for practice, you understand-and I encouraged her to get curious. That's when things got serious."

Maureen rose up on her elbow. "How serious? Did you come?"

"She did," Shine said proudly. "I was a little young for it, but I was trying...and then Aunt Rose walked in."

"Ouch."

"Ouch is right. Aunt Rose went over the top and kept going. I've never seen anything like it." Just thinking about it gave her the chills. "To make a long story short, she locked me naked in the bathroom and called my folks. They came and got me and Dad got into it big-time with Aunt Rose. He said that what we had done was normal and she was the one who was unnatural and it wasn't right to take her own inadequacies as a woman out on us. She, in rebuttal, called me an

incubus and the Whore of Babylon. Then she said we were going straight to hell on the next train and damned if she was going to let us drag her daughter down with us."

Shine laid her head on her arm before continuing. "The next day, Dad called social workers and said he had seen Grace bleeding from her ears and Aunt Rose wouldn't let him in the house to take her to the hospital. They went right out. She was fine and Dad got a pretty nasty dressing down for filing a false report, but at least we knew she was all right. Two days later, Aunt Rose packed up some of their stuff and they disappeared into the night." Shine shrugged for lack of a better ending.

Maureen's mouth was hanging open and after a moment of silence she got up to finish her glass of wine. "I don't know what to say, baby. On the one hand, it's the saddest thing I ever heard. But on the other, it's a really sweet first-time story and your parents sound like every lesbian's dream."

Shine rolled to her back and put her hands behind her head. *I love this new area rug. I'd forgotten how nice it is to lie on the floor.* "Tell me about your first time."

Maureen twisted around to lay her head on Shine's stomach. "With a woman?"

Shine reached down to stroke her face and hair as they talked. "I assume your question means that you started with boys."

"Just one. The night of my senior prom, to be precise."

Shine smiled. "What was his name?" Maureen was quiet for a long moment and she didn't think she would get an answer.

"Carl Macklin."

Shine blinked in surprise. "*Detective* Carl?"

"He wasn't a detective then."

"Wow."

"You're not mad?"

"Not unless you've been with him recently." Shine laughed. "I diddled my cousin, Maureen. I don't have any right to judge you for what you did in high school. Did you at least enjoy it?"

"Not much."

Shine felt sorry for her. "That's too bad."

"You're really okay with it?"

"Why wouldn't I be? He's a nice guy and you obviously still care about each other." Shine let her fingers wander down Maureen's throat and into her blouse. She let her hand form itself around one shoulder, enjoying the feel of soft skin. "So, when did you first sleep with a woman?"

"The summer of my sophomore year in college. I stayed on campus that summer to retake a math class and to work full-time at a bakery to earn extra money for my junior year."

Shine sighed in extreme contentment as Maureen told her story.

Shine paced and fidgeted as she waited for the time to pass. Maureen had insisted that she wanted time to dress for their date and she expected to be picked up at 9 sharp. Dinner had been a lonely event and Shine had been dressed by 7. She couldn't tell if it was the thong underwear she was wearing as a surprise for Maureen or her excitement over the evening ahead that had her squirming. She felt like her skin was being peeled off by the time she could justify leaving.

At Maureen's door, Shine straightened her clothes and knocked exactly at 9. When the door opened, she could feel her eyes swell. "Wow."

Maureen was wearing an off-the-shoulder emerald green dress that ended mid thigh. Her hair was curled softly around her face and she wore makeup and heels.

"Wow," Shine repeated. She stepped inside at Maureen's urging, unaware of how she was making herself move.

Maureen reached to an end table and pulled a tissue out of a box. She moved gracefully to Shine and dabbed at her chin. "No one's ever drooled over me before."

Shine couldn't even feel embarrassed. "I don't understand why not. You're always the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Maureen; but tonight...you're exquisite. I am *totally* underdressed."

Maureen slid a hand deliberately around her waist and up inside the back of her shirt with a pleased smile. "Yes, you are." Shine breathed deeply at the pleasure she felt and then sighed as Maureen's hand moved down to feel inside the tears under her back pockets. Shine watched an eyebrow cock at her. "No underwear either?"

Shine gave back the same confident look. "Not exactly."

Maureen nodded with approval and backed up a step. "I think we're going to have a very good time tonight."

"I'm planning on it," Shine said with heat.

Maureen hesitated and then reached for a small billfold. "I don't have anywhere to carry this. Will you hold it for me?"

Shine opened it and took out Maureen's driver's license. Slipping it into her own wallet, she handed back the billfold. "You won't need this."

"Very hot," Maureen murmured.

Shine discovered that Maureen was wearing garters, and nothing else, in the car. Only biting the inside of her cheek kept her on the road. Maureen directed her to a good-sized club downtown and Shine found a parking space two blocks away.

"You do like to dance, don't you?" Maureen asked as they walked to the club.

"Very much. I dance at work all the time."

"Are you worried about being in a bar again?"

"Not at all." She doubted that she would even notice the surroundings with Maureen at her side.

The club was already crowded and the only place to sit was a single stool on the edge of the dance floor. Shine left her there with a kiss and went to the bar to order white wine and bottled water. While waiting, she studied the other women. She realized that as scandalous as her clothing felt, she was actually one of the most dressed women in the room. Several women were eyeing her and Shine laughed at their feeble attempts to draw her interest.

On her way back to Maureen she realized that all of the women appeared to be a good deal younger than 30. "Is this the right night?" she asked.

"This is the younger crowd. The older women usually come on Saturday."

The thump of the music was overwhelming and they had to speak into each other's ears to be heard. "Maybe we should come back tomorrow."

Maureen's hand slid around her waist and into the back of her jeans to lightly tug on her thong. "Beth might be there."

"Oh." She turned in Maureen's arm and watched the dancers fondly. "They're kind of cute-trying to be all grown up."

"We used to look like that," Maureen reminded her.

Shine rubbed her fingers over Maureen's arm as her hand sneaked under the top buttons of her jeans. "I love how you touch me."

"You have no idea how much I love doing it."

Shine turned to face her and slid her hands over warm thighs. "Yes, I do." After a long, lingering kiss, Shine pulled her onto the dance floor. She paid no attention to the rhythm of the music, dancing entirely to entice Maureen. When she lifted her arms above her head she knew that Maureen was aching to see her breasts.

Maureen's hands were on her continuously: caressing her belly and her back till Shine thought she might lose her mind entirely. Her hips felt as though they were moving independently of the rest of her body and the feel of her T-shirt rubbing against her nipples was sending shock waves of pleasure coursing through her.

Maureen eventually took her back to the stool and Shine took off her leather jacket to lay over it. Flushed with her exertions, Shine leaned back into Maureen and drank her water.

"If I had known you could dance like that," Maureen said into her ear, "I'd have made you bring me much sooner."

"I've never danced like that before. It's all for you, Maureen."

She watched as Maureen took a mouthful of wine and brought her lips to her own. She drank the wine from Maureen's mouth and knew she had never done anything so erotic before. "Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"I want you to know that I don't trust you because you *don't* drink," Maureen said carefully. "I trust you because I *know* you'll never hurt me."

Shine felt a rush of love for this woman. "I want to belong to you." She was instantly aware of the hand that slid up under her shirt to rest beneath her breast. The pounding of her heart drowned out the sound of the music.

"I could take your breast in my hand right now," Maureen said softly into her ear. "Would you try to stop me?"

Shine couldn't breathe. "No."

"I could find out how your nipples respond to my touch. Would you let me do that?"

Shine's eyes closed on her need. "Yes."

"There are 50 women watching you right now, waiting to see if I will." Maureen's tongue traced her ear. "Do you want me to?"

Shine didn't care anymore. Her whole world had shrunk to the feel of Maureen's hand and the sound of her voice. "Please," she gasped.

"Please, yes? Or please, no?"

Her whole body throbbing, Shine groaned. "Yes!"

"I can see how bad you want it, baby. You want it as bad as I do. I can do anything I want to you right now and you'll beg me for more. I can feel it." Maureen's voice was husky and tight. "But I won't disrespect you like that. No matter how bad I want to."

Shine wanted to cry with disappointment and she buried her face in Maureen's throat as she was gathered close. Maureen's hands rubbing her back helped her to slowly relax and she was content to stay where she was forever. "I would have let you," she finally said.

"I know," Maureen responded.

A soft, slow song came over the sound system and Shine pulled Maureen out to dance. Their bodies melded together as if they shared the same skin and Shine felt connected to her on a deeply spiritual level. The moment was flawless, their bodies and souls perfectly in tune and Shine knew this was the moment she had waited for all week. "I love you, Maureen."

Maureen's eyes spilled over. "I love you, too, baby."

Shine kissed the tears away, unaware that she, too, was crying. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you live with me?"

Unimaginable joy spread across Maureen's features. "I want that, too, but we haven't even slept together yet."

"We sleep together all the time," Shine teased happily.

Maureen suddenly seemed shy. "We haven't *made love* yet."

"I can't imagine that it will make us any closer than we are right now," Shine said seriously, "but I was rather hoping we would get there later." She accepted a kiss full of promise and held her tightly. "I love you so much. Have I ever thanked you for being so persistent in asking me out?"

"No," Maureen laughed. "And it wasn't easy. I only showed up once a week because it took that long to recover and build up my courage again."

Shine chuckled with chagrin. "I was *such* a jerk. I don't know why you hung in there."

"I've been listening to you on the radio almost from the beginning. Jim told me in passing early on that he suspected you were gay and I was intrigued by you, but I was always in a relationship or dating so the opportunity never came up."

The music changed, but they ignored it.

"When I was in the hospital after Beth, I would listen to your voice and it eased the pain. Your

voice has always struck a nerve in me."

Shine listened in wonder.

"The first time I saw you, in Carol's kitchen, I was surprised that you were so beautiful, but when you took my hand..." Maureen's eyes took on a special luster. "My heart stopped."

"I felt like I had a hold of a live wire. I was just so stunned that I'd had any reaction to you at all. I'd forgotten that it was even possible. What did I say to you?"

Maureen laughed. "You said, 'If you made it, I'm sure it'll be great.'"

Laughter made Shine feel more energetic and she danced back to shimmy for her lover. To be validated in her love was exhilarating and Shine felt as if she could do anything. The hunger in Maureen's eyes drove her to be daring and she grabbed the hem of her shirt as if to take it off. Inching it slowly upwards, she watched Maureen's eyes as they followed her progress.

At the moment when Shine would have to decide to continue or stop, Maureen's gaze met her own, then slipped past her. She watched as Maureen was instantly consumed with terror and spun to see what was wrong. She had time to see only a blur before her left eye mushroomed into agony.

Time slowed to a crawl and Shine felt her feet leave the floor. It was an eternity of confusion before it speeded back up and she crashed into a table. Struggling to her knees in shock, she cupped her eye. *What happened? Maureen?*

She looked up through a haze of red and saw a tall, strong woman with her hands around Maureen's throat. Her world became cold and silent. She was moving at once, shoving the overturned table aside and knowing exactly what to do.

Reaching out, Shine grabbed the woman's ear and wrenched it hard. Part of her wondered if she had torn it off considering all of the blood, but the logical part of her mind was watching the woman's hands reaching to protect it from further damage. With time slowing just enough to give her an advantage, Shine grabbed a finger and thumb. Yanking them down to waist level, she turned them inside out and twisted. The woman went up on her toes with a scream that carried over the music.

Shine started to shake with outrage. She knew from those long ago self-defense classes that she was in complete control and that she could twist an elbow or shoulder out of joint with a minimum of effort. Her mind searched for answers and came up with only one: *This must be Beth*. Shine studied the gasping woman. *She's prettier than I expected. I only saw her as a monster. I wonder what made her turn out like this?*

"Let me go...let me go...let me go..."

Shine listened to Beth's tortured chant with no emotion. She turned her face slowly at a hand on

her shoulder and looked into a familiar face. "I know you...?"

"Wendy. We met at the race track."

Shine felt like she was in a dream. "I remember you. You helped me."

Wendy glanced at Beth quickly. "Do you want help now?"

"I'm okay." Shine's head was floating and she was having a hard time concentrating. "Will you find Maureen for me? I'm worried about her."

"She's okay, Shine. Tess is with her."

Shine nodded, vaguely aware that Wendy was rubbing her back. "Somebody should call the police. She tried to hurt Maureen."

"They're coming, Shine. Maybe we should take her outside for them."

Shine's grip on Beth's ear and hand were solid and she let Wendy clear a path. Beth tried to resist as they walked and Shine shifted the position of her hand slightly. Beth screamed again and was more cooperative. Shine could hear her talking, but the words didn't mean anything.

"I'm going to kill you...She's mine...Let go of me, you bitch...You're breaking my arm...It's all lies-everybody lies about me...This isn't right..."

Maureen's hand was on her back as she stepped outside. She didn't know how she could tell it was Maureen, but she knew she was right.

Without trying to cause any further harm she pushed Beth up against a wall. She tried to let go of her ear, but her fingers wouldn't work.

"I'm here, baby."

Maureen's words filtered through the mist of her thoughts and she felt almost happy again. "I can't let go," she said. "Her ear...I can't let go." Maureen's hands slid up her arm and over her bloody fingers. Her fingers eased suddenly at her touch and fell away. "I didn't mean to hurt her. I was just trying to make her stop."

"You did great, baby. The police are coming."

Maureen was crying freely and Shine put her arm around her for an awkward hug. "Are you okay? I saw her..." She looked back to Beth's face pressed up against the wall, blood on the side of her face. "She was trying to kill you."

"You saved me, Shine. You were amazing."

She felt a rush of exhilaration and smiled as her head cleared a bit. "I couldn't let her hurt you, Maureen. I have other plans tonight."

"Has she tied you up yet?" Beth asked with venom. "She likes to top her women, you know. Ask her about the box under...Aah!"

Shine squeezed the fingers in her hand to shut her up. "Be nice, Beth. I love her and she can do whatever she wants to me. It's none of your business anymore."

A uniformed policeman was suddenly there. Other women were gathered around and they were all trying to explain what they had seen. Shine was confused again, but it passed after a few minutes when he braced Beth against the wall and told Shine she could let go. Maureen guided her away from the turmoil and Shine sat down on the edge of a planter box.

Shine smiled in amazement. "We caught her, Maureen. You're safe now." Maureen lifted a rag to her face and Shine looked at it with bewilderment. "What's that for?"

"You're hurt, baby."

If someone had told her that she had suddenly become a man, she would not have been more surprised. She looked down at herself and realized that she was covered in blood. Looking around for an external explanation, she realized that she wasn't seeing so well. Remembering the pain she had felt so long ago, she reached up to her eye and came away with more blood. "I'm bleeding."

She broke out in a clammy sweat and threw herself at the curb so she could throw up. Unable to resist afterwards, she let Maureen and Wendy pull her away and lay her on the sidewalk. Tess showed up with a rag full of ice and the feel of it on her face was like deliverance.

Feeling better now, Shine looked at all of the faces hovering over her. Maureen was still tear streaked and had smears of blood on her shoulder and hands. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I'm fine, baby. Really."

Shine relaxed. She smiled up at Wendy and Tess. "We're having a barbecue Sunday after next. Do you two want to come?"

An officer came and asked for her statement and Shine told him what she could remember. She tried to refuse when an ambulance showed up, but Maureen begged her to go with them and she gave in. She had never been in an ambulance before and while she admired the professionalism of the EMT's, she couldn't think of any other reason to recommend it as a mode of transportation.

She was lying on a gurney with a blazing headache and a thin hospital gown when Maureen was

finally allowed to see her.

"How are you doing, babe?"

"I think they forgot me," Shine said. All was right with the world when Maureen's hand smoothed her hair back. "They can forget about a tip."

Maureen smiled sadly and looked around. "The least we can do is try to get some of this blood off of you."

Shine couldn't take her eye off of Maureen as she scrounged up warm water and a towel. She relaxed completely in the care of the woman she loved. "Is it bad?" she asked as Maureen took away the ice pack and cleaned the rest of her face.

"No, baby, just bloody." Maureen pulled the gown away and gently cleaned her neck and chest.

"Under other circumstances, this would be wonderful," Shine said as the warm cloth circled her breast.

Maureen smiled weakly. "When you feel better maybe we can play conquering hero and devoted nursemaid again." She shook her head. "You'll still need to take a bath when you get home. There's blood in your hair and..." Maureen covered her mouth with a muffled sob.

"Don't cry," Shine pleaded. "Please, Maureen. This wasn't what I had planned, but at least now we can stop worrying about when she's going to show up. It's over."

The curtain swished aside and Maureen casually pulled the gown back into place. A nurse came in with an admissions form and Maureen took it from her. She filled it out as the nurse cleaned the cut in preparation for a doctor and Shine gave her the information she needed. The doctor was there in short order and after checking her eye thoroughly and pronouncing it fit, he stitched up the gash. Shine let Maureen handle the information for her medications. Her headache wasn't the worst she'd ever had, but it was relentless and she was exhausted.

She knew that Maureen's heart was breaking, but there was nothing she could do while still in the hospital. She was given a shot of antibiotics and a painkiller that didn't seem to do anything for her head, and just let the activity in the room swirl about her.

"I'll be right back," Maureen said as the room emptied.

Alone, Shine sat up in anticipation of going home. It made her head pound, but she really wanted to be away. Maureen came back a few minutes later with surgical scrubs for her to wear home. Shine accepted her help in dressing and a short time later she was wheeled to the exit.

"We'll be home soon," Maureen said as they pulled away from the curb.

"It wasn't your fault," Shine said. "No matter what you think you can't make it be your fault."

"I know, baby. Let's not talk about it now."

Shine laid her head back against the seat. "I'm so tired."

With the possible exception of her family's death, Maureen could not ever remember feeling worse. Even the trusting blue eyes of the woman lying all but helpless in the tub didn't make her feel any better. Careful not to get the stitches wet, she rinsed shampoo from Shine's hair and added the pinkish tinge of the water to her list of things to feel guilty about. She hadn't thought it possible, but she loved Shine more now than ever.

The entire incident had taken on the quality of a surreal nightmare. Even drenched in her own blood, Shine had been beautiful. Not once had she used more force than necessary and she had not responded to Beth's verbal insults or taken revenge for being hurt. Even when Beth had started spouting her own twisted version of their bedroom secrets, Shine had merely proclaimed Maureen's right to do as she wished as if it were unthinkable to do otherwise.

Urging Shine to sit up, Maureen lovingly washed her clean of her ordeal. Shine was very nearly asleep already and she worked quickly to dry her and help her to bed.

Shine's eyes opened briefly as the blankets were drawn up. "Love you," she murmured.

Maureen pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead. "I love you, too, baby. Go to sleep." She turned out the light and left the room. Collecting Shine's bloody clothes, she went to the laundry room and set everything to soak over night in cold, soapy water. After adding her own clothes, she walked naked through the house and locked up.

She checked on Shine one more time, then took a shower in Shine's old room. After cleaning herself of Shine's blood and her own fear, Maureen sank to the shower floor and wept.

TWELVE

Shine was awake and reaching for the phone before she had a chance to think. Her back and neck instantly contracted in a spasm at her sudden movement and she whimpered with the cruelty of

it. The phone rang again and her head began to pound.

Maureen's voice accompanied the activity she could feel on the other side of the bed. "Don't move, baby. I'll get it."

Shine didn't even try to respond. All of her attention was focused on apologizing to her body.

Maureen sat down against the curve of her belly and answered the phone. "Hi, Carl. This is Maureen."

Shine couldn't move her arms yet, but she pulled her knees up against Maureen's hip in an effort to hug her.

"She just woke up," Maureen said into the phone. "But I think she wishes she hadn't."

Shine felt the covers pulled away from her shoulders and a warm hand gently rubbed her back. Having the sweet touch to concentrate on helped her muscles to slowly loosen.

"Sure. Would you give us an hour?"

Shine grunted at the idea of being ready for *anything* in an hour.

"Make that an hour and a half...Okay, we'll see you then." Maureen hung up the phone. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Not too bad," Shine confessed. "It's just that when I reached for the phone, my back cramped up." With the spasm easing, Shine sighed and opened her eyes. "You're not wearing any clothes."

"I guess that means you're not blind," Maureen grinned. "What do you want first? Breakfast, a hot bath or pain medication?"

"If that's all the choices I get, I'm going back to sleep."

Maureen stood up, dragged all the covers off the bed and dropped them in a pile on the floor. "We'll see."

"Nazi."

"Wimp."

"Fine." Shine kicked her feet off the side of the bed and began to cautiously push herself into a sitting position. Maureen helped her the last little bit and Shine hung her head, waiting for the pain to go away.

"Where does it hurt?"

"My head. It's throbbing." She waited while Maureen brought her a painkiller.

"You'll feel better soon. Just try not to move your head too much. Remember that you've got a concussion. I'm going to make some coffee. Do you want some?"

Shine nodded carefully. The longer she sat up, the better she felt and after a few minutes she headed for the bathroom.

"Well, that's not so bad," she said to her reflection. She had expected her eye to be black, but it was only a swollen, angry red. The cut bisected her eyebrow and looked pretty messy, but she suspected that it would heal up clean and largely unnoticeable. She poked at it gingerly and decided not to do that again.

"What are you doing?"

"Poking my eye," Shine answered. "When I was a little kid I wanted to be a pirate when I grew up. I was always trying to figure out a way to get a scar because everyone *knows* that pirates have scars." She grinned at Maureen's image in the mirror. "Looks like I finally got my wish."

Maureen moved behind her and wrapped her in her arms. "You are the pirate of my heart, baby."

Carl stopped just inside the doorway. "From the blood trail you left at the club I expected worse."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Shine said from the couch. "Next time I'll try to..."

"There had *better not* be a next time," Maureen interrupted firmly as she closed the front door. "Would you like some coffee, Carl?"

"Please." Carl walked over to see Shine's eye better.

She tipped her head back and let him examine it. "How's Beth's ear?"

"Turns out it was all *your* blood. For all her complaining, she's not hurt at all."

Shine felt an incredible sense of relief. She had not been aware until that moment how worried she was about it. "Good. I really wasn't trying to hurt her."

"Can you see okay? There's no permanent damage is there?"

"I'm fine, Carl. Thanks for asking."

The big detective backed up and sat in a chair. "That was a hell of a business last night." He accepted coffee from Maureen and let her sit next to Shine before continuing. "When I left the

station 20 minutes ago we'd already collected 16 calls from witnesses volunteering to testify and 11 walk-ins. That's in addition to the statements officers took at the scene. I don't think we've ever had that many eager witnesses to a case before. Seven of them weren't even drinking and all of them were watching you two when it went down." He grinned ear to ear. "It must have been quite a show."

"It was Maureen's dress..."

"You should see her dance..." they said together.

"Actually," he laughed, "the witnesses were very specific and I happen to *know* what it was." He pointed his finger at Shine with mock severity. "You can get in trouble for that, you know. The law calls it indecent exposure."

"More like erotic exposure," Maureen teased.

Shine's blush made her eye sting and she rubbed it cautiously with one fingertip. "I couldn't help it."

"Don't scratch, Shine. I'll get something cold and that'll stop the itch."

Maureen left the room and Shine leaned over to Carl. "It was her dress," she said quietly. "She looked *so* hot!" Carl laughed easily and Maureen came back with an ice pack. Shine obediently put it to her face.

Carl sobered. "So how are *you* feeling, Maureen? I hear you were being choked to death."

Maureen shook her head. "Only for a few seconds. Shine was there so fast she didn't have time to hurt me."

"What did she say to you?"

Shine looked at Maureen in surprise. She hadn't been aware that there had been *any* words exchanged.

"She said that I belonged to her and I said I would rather die."

Shine found herself wishing she *had* dislocated a joint or two.

"Not that it matters," Carl said. "I called Stan Russell at home this morning and let him know what's going on. I'm not sure if he has this number so you may want to call him later about pressing charges."

"I've got his number at work. I'll touch base with him tomorrow."

Carl pulled a camera from his pocket. "If it's all right with you, Shine, I'd like to get some

pictures of that eye."

Shine stood and let Carl take his pictures.

"You should take some of her back, too," Maureen said. She helped to hold Shine's shirt out of the way and he whistled. "Looks worse than your eye," he said.

"Really?" No matter how she twisted, she couldn't see what they were talking about.

"I'll show you later," Maureen offered.

"You really impressed people with how you handled Beth," Carl added with admiration. "Half of them want to know what you did and the other half want your phone number."

"You wouldn't..." Shine started.

"She's mine, Carl."

Shine leaned into Maureen, glad of the arm that came around her. "Did she admit to the vandalism of Maureen's car and house?"

"No. But it's not necessary with the other charges against her." Carl pocketed the camera and made as if to leave. "I've got to get going, but I'm glad you two are okay."

"Hey," Shine said impulsively. "We're having a barbecue here next Sunday. It would be great if you and your son could come."

Carl's face lit up in surprise. "Really? What can I bring?"

"There's a hot tub out back, so bring a suit."

The doorbell's strangled ding woke Shine up from a light nap on the couch. "I thought I asked you to remind me to fix that," she said as she opened her eyes.

"Slipped my mind," Maureen said as she rose from where she had been reading.

"Who is it?"

"I invited some people over."

Shine stretched till her elbows cracked. "Why?"

"To show you off." Maureen opened the door and Jim's family spilled in.

Shine threw her arms over her face to protect her eye as the kids headed for her in a rush.

"*STOP!*"

Even Shine blanched when Maureen unexpectedly bellowed. She peeked out to see the children frozen uncertainly in place.

"Shine is hurt," Maureen continued in a smaller, yet no less commanding, voice. "There is to be no jumping on her today. Am I understood?"

"What happened?" Carol asked.

Shine slowly removed her arms as the children moved cautiously to her side. "Hey, guys."

Angela's nose wrinkled up and Travis winced. "What happened to your eye?" They both asked.

"I left the seat up on the toilet and Maureen punched me."

Travis looked over his shoulder at Maureen's face and then turned back. "I don't believe you."

"Okay." She tried to look as though she was thinking hard. "How about this? I was at the rodeo and this bronc tried to eat my hat." Colin climbed onto her stomach and the two older kids were grinning. "No? I'm a secret agent? A traveling salesman? A bee keeper?" They were shaking their heads at each suggestion. "You guys are too smart for me."

Carol and Jim stood over their children and Shine let them get a good look.

"Who did this to you?" Jim asked roughly.

Carol understood immediately and turned to Maureen. "Beth?"

Maureen nodded and Shine gave her attention to Colin. "Hey, turkey toes, do you know what it's called when your eye looks like this?"

Colin's finger went up his nose and he shook his head.

Shine absently pulled his finger out and wiped it on his shirt. "When you get an eye like this it's called a *shiner*." She watched his eyes as he put it together.

He broke into a delighted smile. "Hey, mama! Chine gots a china!"

Shine laughed at his success. "You made a joke!"

Angela knelt down beside her. "Does it hurt?"

"Only when I poke it. It itches a lot though. Maureen won't let me scratch it."

"How come?" Travis asked.

"She says scratching will make it turn into a *big* scar. She makes me put ice on it instead. Did you guys bring your swim suits?"

"They've got them on under their clothes," Carol said.

"Can we?" Angela asked excitedly.

Shine nodded and they ran outside. Still tired and-to her mind-unreasonably weak, she sighed and turned to look at the other adults in the room. They were all staring at her. "What?"

Jim sat down in the nearest chair. "What happened?"

"Maureen tells it better," she said as she got up and went to the kitchen. Taking the ice pack from the freezer, she held it to her eye and watched the kids getting in the hot tub. Halfway through Maureen's telling of the previous evening's events, Shine couldn't take it anymore. She went outside and slipped into the tub with the kids.

Later, while Colin played in the dirt under the deck, Shine sat between Angela and Travis on the edge of the tub and told them what had really happened. "She only punched me one time," she explained after letting them see the bruises from tables and chairs on her back.

"She sure messed you up." Travis announced.

"Yeah. But she's in jail now and I'm not and Maureen made me French Toast for breakfast. Plus, I get to be grumpy and she thinks it's cute."

"Cool," Angela said with a grin.

"Did you bleed a lot?" Travis again.

"Buckets. And I puked in a gutter, too. Fighting sucks."

"She saved my life," Maureen said unexpectedly from behind them.

The children looked at Shine with awe. "Don't forget I puked in the gutter in front of about a hundred people," she reminded them.

"You're a hero," Angela breathed.

"Nah. But do you think my scar makes me look like a pirate?"

"May I see your back?" Carol interrupted her reverie.

The kids were figuring out MouseTrap in the living room and Shine was relaxing on one of the new lounge chairs. Reluctantly, she sat up and pulled her shirt up again. "It's no big deal, Carol. I got all of this before I even knew she was there. It's not like I fought for it."

"You'll have to forgive me if I refuse to belittle what you did."

Shine pulled her shirt down. "I got in the way. That's all."

"If that's true, that's enough. It could have been Maureen and for that I thank you. She's not just my friend; she's almost my sister. I saw what happened to her last time Beth lost her temper so I'm a better judge of what you saved her from than you are."

Shine's stomach rolled. "I was just thinking about that."

Carol sat down on the chair next to her. "What do you want to know?"

Shine shook her head. "To tell the truth, I think I know as much as I can handle for the time being. I was just comparing how I feel today after being hit just once with how she must have felt. It just staggers me."

"It was horrible. I'm not sure she even remembers most of the first few days. They kept her pretty doped up because of her hand."

"Well, it's over now."

"Thanks to you."

On Monday after work Shine pulled into her driveway completely exhausted. She couldn't figure out how a black eye could have such a deleterious effect on the rest of her body. All she did was scoot around in an office chair and talk. She dragged herself into the house and went straight to bed. Too tired to sleep and too stubborn to take any more painkillers, she lay there on the edge of tears.

She heard the front door open a short time later and wavered between wanting to climb into Maureen's arms to cry and hiding in the closet till she went away. She closed her eyes as Maureen sat down next to her on the bed. A warm hand caressed her cheek and she turned her face into it helplessly.

"You sounded tired," Maureen said sympathetically.

"How can a black eye make me feel so crappy?" She couldn't keep the tears out of her voice and it made her feel childish. "I feel like I got hit by a truck and I'm dizzy all the time." Maureen

stood and Shine felt her shoes being removed.

"This is the third day, baby. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"I hope so." Shine opened her eyes to see Maureen looking at her with concern. "I just feel like crying all the time."

"Do you want one of your meds?"

"No."

"Can I make you dinner?"

"No."

Maureen's weight settled back on the bed and Shine felt her warm hand on her stomach in slow, smooth circles. Struggling not to cry, Shine closed her eyes again and tried not to think.

Maureen rubbed Shine's belly until she was sure she slept. Pulling the comforter over her, she changed out of her work clothes. She had listened to Shine on the radio at work and heard her getting more and more lifeless as the day passed. She doubted it was obvious to most listeners, but Maureen had known that she wasn't feeling well.

Maureen cooked herself some dinner and made a TV dinner for Shine at the same time. After she ate, she puttered around cleaning and doing laundry. Hours later she was reading on the couch with the stereo on low when Shine's arms slipped around her neck.

"Sorry I was so grumpy," Shine said into her ear.

"That was it?" Maureen teased. "Hell, I've got it made. I can handle that easy." Maureen set her book and reading glasses aside and patted her lap. "Come here, baby. I missed you."

Shine crawled over the back of the couch and lay her head on Maureen's leg. "I missed you, too." She pulled Maureen's hand to her belly and encouraged her to begin rubbing again.

"I saved you some dinner for when you get hungry," Maureen said.

"You're a good woman, Maureen."

"So are you, baby." Maureen pulled up Shine's shirt and ran her hand over warm, soft flesh.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm still a little tired, but I feel much better. How was your day?"

"Stan called me after lunch."

"What did he say?"

"He needs to talk to you about pressing charges. I told him that you might call in the morning if you felt up to it."

"We'll see," Shine said neutrally. "What else did he say?"

"Judge Farris ruled today on her probation violation. She'll be sent to the prison in Anderson on Friday to finish her time."

Shine's blue eyes looked up at her in concern and she wanted to drown in them.

"How do you feel about that?"

Maureen sorted through her conflicting emotions. "On the one hand, I'm glad she's going to prison. She's earned it and I feel safer with her gone. But on the other, it doesn't seem like enough." She traced Shine's injured face with a gentle finger. "I'm so *angry* with her for this. It's never going to go away and I'll always be reminded that my ex-girlfriend scarred you. I don't know if there's anything that can happen to her that will make me feel better about that."

Shine's voice was calm and soft. "It's not your fault, Maureen."

"I know that, but I can't..." Tears came unbidden and she let them fall. "I can't help thinking that I brought this into our lives. If I had just been smarter or wiser I would have seen all of this coming when I looked into her eyes. But I didn't see it and now..."

Shine sat up and embraced her. "Oh, Maureen. What am I going to do with you?"

She tucked her face into Shine's shoulder and cried, but soft laughter made it hard to continue.

"I'm *glad* it happened," Shine was saying. "I wouldn't take it back for anything in the world. I'm proud of this scar and every time I see it I'm going to know that I lived up to my own expectations."

"You're not making sense."

Shine's hands framed her face and smiled. "Think about it. Have you ever said: If *this* happens, I'm going to do *that*? But when it actually *does* happen, you do something else entirely? Usually something you're not proud of?"

Maureen nodded while Shine stripped off her T-shirt and used it to wipe away tears. She couldn't help looking, but she tried not to leer.

"You never know how you're going to act or what you're going to do until you're *there*. You

always *hope* you'll do the right thing, but you can't know. When I stopped her from hurting you, I learned that I was strong enough-in all the ways that matter-to be yours."

Maureen thought she understood what Shine was trying to say. "You're starting to believe that you're a good person."

"I'm not as good as I *want* to be for you yet, but I'm good for it if you'll give me a little more time."

"You're more than good enough for me already, Shine."

Shine dropped her gaze and began to pick absently at the buttons on Maureen's blouse. "I'm still uncomfortable about being called a hero and having a fuss made over me. I'd rather make up stories about it, if that's okay with you."

Maureen pretended to be unaware that she was rapidly losing her blouse. "It's up to you, I guess. I'd prefer you not tell people I punched you though-even as a joke."

"You're right. It *was* in poor taste." Shine broke into a grin. "Travis was your little champion though, wasn't he? It takes courage to call an adult a liar."

Maureen was finding it hard to breathe and her heart was thumping wildly as her breasts were uncovered and Shine's fingers played over them. "It does." Shine's mouth hovered over her own.

"Maureen?"

Shine's mouth stayed just out of reach. "Yes, baby?"

"You're not going to say anything about my eye, are you?"

Maureen filled her hands with Shine's breasts for the first time. "Is something wrong with your eye?" Shine's mouth took her and she surrendered.

Sunrise filtered through the blinds in blades of golden light just inches above the bed and Maureen lazily ran her fingers through them as dust motes sparkled just out of reach. She felt perfectly at peace and wished that she could spend the day in bed with Shine. *My lover*. She imagined how it would feel to say it out loud. *This is my lover, Shine Avery. She is my lover. My lover and I... Have you met my lover? That's my lover, over there.*

With a sigh that set the sparkles to dancing, she turned her face to watch Shine sleep. *Last night was amazing. I've never had a first time be so...confident. It wasn't that we didn't have to learn to recognize each other's needs and responses; it's just that there was no awkwardness about it. Every touch; every word; every sensation was welcomed and explored without fear or uncertainty. It really was like coming home to each other. All this time she has been so tentative*

and fearful. I expected a mouse afraid of her own desires. I thought I would have to coax her into sexual response. I was ready to push and cajole and seduce to bring her to yield to my touch.

Maureen's skin tightened pleurably and she stiffened in memory. *She almost ate me alive!* Her hands moved slowly down her body, reminding her how altogether different Shine's hands had felt in the same places. *Her passion is an avalanche, a tidal wave, an earthquake, and a force of nature. She gave it all-no holds barred, full contact, in your face, howling at the moon and no turning back. Her ardor gave me permission to abandon my pride, my dignity and my self-respect-then gave it back to me with her own unconditional surrender. Never have I felt so free to feel and express love and passion.*

Shine mumbled and Maureen could see activity behind her eyelids. *She's dreaming. I wonder...* Moving carefully, she reached out with the barest whisper of a touch and drew a circle around the sleeping nipple of one small breast. She watched it rise slightly in profile. Fascinated, she held her breath and repeated the touch. Again, a response. Moving slowly, she circled it several times and the areola crinkled under her fingertip.

Shine mumbled again and Maureen smiled. Rising slowly to her elbow, she attended to the other nipple with the same results. Encouraged, she gingerly continued her ministrations. Wetting her fingertip in her mouth she gently rubbed the very tip of one breast. Shine's breath caught and Maureen stopped until she was calmly dreaming again.

Not wanting Shine to wake yet, Maureen cautiously rolled the covers down to Shine's thighs. *My God, she's so very lovely.* With the lightest possible strokes, she touched the long lines and smooth curves of her lover's body until Shine suddenly tensed. "Shhh..." she whispered. "You're dreaming, baby. Go back to sleep."

A smile ghosted Shine's lips and she appeared to return to her slumber. Pleased, Maureen waited for several minutes before advancing. Shine's nipples were hard knots now and she squeezed one softly between finger and thumb. She watched Shine's nostrils flare slightly and knew that she was feigning sleep. She drew a finger slowly down to play in Shine's pubic hair and watched gooseflesh rise on her breasts and belly.

"You are so beautiful," she breathed softly. "Please don't wake up yet." She continued to play: wanting to see how far she could take her before necessity ended their little game. Her touch remained soft, light and random. Soft puffs of air brought more gooseflesh and Shine was soon breathing fast and shallow.

When she could no longer stand to wait, Maureen ran her tongue around a swollen nipple and whispered against it. "If you were awake, I would ask you to spread your legs for me, but you aren't and I don't know what to do."

She waited anxiously for Shine to respond; hoping that she was enjoying this new game as much as she was. When it happened, her heart swelled painfully.

Shine stretched, her entire body rigid with tension, and readjusted herself with her arms over her

head and one leg thrown casually over Maureen's knees. Her other knee bent, wavered slightly as she relaxed back into the bed and fell to one side as if forgotten. If she had not known better, Maureen would have thought her truly asleep.

"You amaze me, my beauty." She accompanied her hushed words with a reminder of the touches she had given so far. She let her fingers wander aimlessly into the complex valley that now lay exposed to her will. *She's so wet; so ready for me! I could never be so still and patient if she were doing this to me.*

One hand came to rest in her hair and Maureen laid her head at Shine's breast. She closed her eyes to better see with her fingers and listened to the desperate beat of the heart under her ear. Shine's fingers soon began a distracted scratching and Maureen knew that she was fully engaged in sensation. Judging it time-and far past time at that-she concentrated her touch just where Shine seemed to enjoy it the most.

Shine's upper body arched once, then again and began to shiver uncontrollably. Continuing for the space of only a heartbeat, Maureen then slipped one finger deep inside of Shine's tight opening and stroked quickly behind her mons. Shine convulsed with her entire body and Maureen relaxed. She remained inside of her as her quivering gradually subsided and her heartbeat returned to normal.

Intensely pleased with herself, Maureen finally spoke. "Are you awake, baby?"

Shine hesitated a moment. "I was having a dream."

"Really," Maureen smiled. "What were you dreaming about?"

Shine's voice was silken. "I dreamed that you were making love to me."

"Hmm. Was I any good?"

"Exquisite."

Maureen started to remove her finger from Shine's depths, but changed her mind when the blue eyes fluttered with passion. She began a slow in and out motion that made Shine moan softly. "You surprised me last night."

"In a good way, I hope."

"In the best ways."

Shine licked her lips slowly and gazed into Maureen's eyes. "Tell me how?"

Maureen softly stroked Shine's G-spot and watched her lover shudder. "The way you seduced me, for one. You were so sure of yourself."

"I'm not afraid any more."

"I could tell. I liked it."

"Good."

"You're an amazing lover, baby. You blew me away."

Shine smiled. "Also good, though the reverse is also true."

"And then there's this." She turned her finger over and drew it out until she had a hold of the thin membrane between finger and thumb. "You're a virgin."

Shine licked her lips again. "I may be intact, but I'm not a virgin."

Maureen slid deep, enjoying how responsive Shine was to her touch. "I want it."

Startled blue eyes looked up at her. "You do?"

"Yes, I do. Not right this minute, but I want it."

Shine slid a hand down to cover Maureen's, holding her still. "You know, I don't think my other lovers ever even thought about it. They just worked around it."

"Fools."

Bringing her hand up to caress Maureen's cheek, Shine grinned. "All right. It's yours. I've always wondered what it must feel like to have more than one finger filling me up. When do you want to do it?"

Maureen returned to the thin veil and rubbed it gently. "I want to play with it for a while. I've never felt one before. It's very exciting to me. You take good care of it for me."

Shine slowly shifted to put Maureen on her back and leaned over her. "Right now, I intend to take good care of you."

Maureen lifted her damp fingers to rub Shine's essence on her nipples. "What a good idea."

Shine waited to contact the District Attorney's office until Maureen left for work. She waited on hold for almost five minutes and was chewing her thumbnail when she was finally put through.

"Stan Russell."

"Um," she floundered. "My name is Shine Avery and I'm calling..."

"Oh, right!" He interrupted. "Maureen's girlfriend. I'm glad you called."

"She said you needed to talk to me." She watched a boy from down the street practicing with a skateboard on the curb out of her front window.

"I'd like to set up a time to go over the assault case with you as soon as possible. Ms. Cox is being shipped to the state prison on Friday, as you likely know from Maureen, and I'd like to get this settled before that if we can. It will save us a lot of time and inconvenience later."

Shine switched to her index fingernail indecisively.

"Ms. Avery?"

"I'm here. It's just that I've never had to do this before. Can you tell me what my options are, please?"

"You have every right to ask. I apologize for not bringing you up to speed right up front. I've got Maureen's old case on my desk and I've been seeing this as a continuation of *that* case and not your new one. Let's see. As her second offense, conviction *could* carry 4 to 8 years in prison. That would require a trial and could take several months to prosecute depending on the court's schedule and her lawyer. Your other option is to allow me to negotiate a plea, in which case she will very likely accept 2 to 4 years. *In addition* to the time she's already serving."

Shine closed her eyes with a sigh. *What should I do?*

"The case against her is overwhelming, Ms. Avery. We have more witnesses than we know what to do with. The physical evidence is solid. It all hinges on how hard you want to push this. My office is more than happy to prosecute this case."

"And if I don't want to press charges?"

Stan was silent for a long moment. "You do have that option, but I think you should consider that Ms. Cox has proven herself to be a danger to you both."

"I'm trying to consider everything, Mr. Russell." Knowing what she *had* to do, Shine pressed on. "I want to meet Beth."

"Excuse me?"

"I won't know what I want to do until I meet her. Will you arrange it?"

"Yes," he said reluctantly. "Though I don't recommend it."

"I'm not trying to be difficult, Mr. Russell. Truly, I'm not. But I don't need revenge and I don't

believe that prison has anything to do with justice. If I'm going to be a party to caging a human being, I want to *know* that I'm doing the right thing. Since I don't know Beth, it seems logical to me that I at least give her a chance to convince me I would be making a mistake. I won't sleep otherwise."

"Very well. When would you like me to set this up?"

"Tonight. I get off work at 5:30. I'll have a decision for you first thing in the morning."

Maureen was cleaning her desk in preparation for going home when Shine called. Just the sound of her voice on the line was enough to make her weak in the knees. "Hey, baby."

"Hey. I've been thinking about you all day."

"Me, too. I don't think I accomplished anything at all today. I pushed papers around a lot and thought about you."

"I had dead air twice."

"I heard." Maureen laughed at the both of them. "We should have called in sick and spent the day in bed."

"There's always tomorrow?"

Maureen turned it over in her head and thought she could make it work. "Are you sure you're up to it? You came home from work exhausted yesterday, remember? How are you feeling today?"

"The insides of my thighs are really sore-like I worked out too much-but other than that..."

Maureen laughed. Her own body was deliciously sore in new ways as well and the memories of how she had gotten that way had preoccupied her all day.

"Listen," Shine said seriously. "I talked to Stan Russell this morning after you left and he needs me to decide how we're going to handle this thing with Beth."

"What's to decide? Can't he just make a deal with her?"

"He could," Shine said carefully, "but I'm not sure if that's what I want."

Maureen smiled affectionately. "Well, of course, if you want to go through a trial, I'll support you all the way. It's your decision, baby." The line was silent for a moment and her smile began to fade.

"And if I decide to drop the charges?"

She felt like she had been doused with ice water. "Why would you do that?"

"I'm not saying I will," Shine said quickly. "My point is that I'm not sure what the best course of action is. Stan wants me to give him an answer ASAP and there are a couple of things I need to do before I can give him one."

She felt a sense of desperation mingled with fear. "Such as what?"

"Talking it over with you is most important. But also," she hesitated, "I want to meet Beth. I need to know if..."

"What?" Maureen felt sick to her stomach. "You need her side of the story? Have I given you any reason to doubt that I'm telling you the truth?"

"I *do* believe you, Maureen, and if I *needed* verification, Carol and Jim are more than ready to provide it. But that's not what this is about."

Pain and fear: anger and grief: Maureen felt like her head was going to spin off and her heart ached. "Then what *is* it about, Shine? Tell me what it's about."

"If I press charges and she stays in prison-is that the best thing? I'm not particularly upset about my eye, so if I do this it will be to protect you. If I think she'll just go away and leave you alone, then prison time is unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?" Anger bubbled up. "She scars you for life and you think punishment is unnecessary?"

"Maybe 3 and a half years is punishment enough."

"She deserves *that* for what she did to *me*! She deserves *more* for what she did to you!" *I have to make her understand!*

"All I want is for her to leave you alone."

"What about your eye?"

"I might be the one with a black eye, but she wasn't after me, Maureen. She was after you."

"How does letting her out of jail make any of this right?"

"No matter what I do, she *is* going to get out of jail someday. Is she still going to be a problem or is she going to move on? I need to meet her so I can judge that for myself. I don't want to send someone to jail out of revenge, hon."

"If you do this, she's going to fill your head with lies. She's going to twist everything we were

together into a knot of doubt in your heart and things will never be the same between us."

"Have a little faith in me, Maureen. I'm not doing this to find out if I like her. I only want to protect you the best I can because I love you."

Maureen's tears blurred her vision. "I love you, too." She hung up the phone, unable to continue talking about it. When it started ringing again, she picked up her purse and headed home. Heartache and dread were her right and left hands and she didn't realize where she was going until she pulled up in front of her little house.

Feeling that it was appropriate somehow, she went inside. Very little of her belongings had been transferred to Shine's house so far: mainly clothes and toiletries. So, while it didn't feel like her home anymore, there was a great deal of comfort to be had being in her own space. She played her messages, all old except for the news that her car was ready to pick up, chose a bottle of wine from her small cellar and went to her bedroom to sit in her rocking chair. Tchaikovsky kept her company in her misery and it was hours before the doorbell rang and she realized she had finished the bottle.

Knowing it was Shine at the door, she hugged herself tightly and tried to close her ears. The knocking eventually ceased and she felt even worse.

"There you are."

She could hear Shine's voice and it took her a moment to place her at the window. "Go home, Shine. I want to be alone for a while."

"Please let me in. I just want to talk."

"Go away. I don't feel like justifying my relationship with Beth right now."

"I don't need you to. Please, Maureen. I'm sorry if I hurt you. It wasn't what I intended."

Shine's desperate face on the other side of the glass was breaking her heart. "I can't do this right now. Please, go home, baby." She watched Shine look to the side as if in thought and then turn a tearful gaze on her.

"Is this how it's always going to be? When you get hurt or angry, you'll just run away and get drunk? If it is, I need to know. You know where I live. I thought you lived there, too."

Anguish was a hot knife to her heart as Shine turned away and Maureen doubled over in uncontrollable sobs.

Shine was dreaming about coffee long before she woke up enough to realize she really could smell it. Having had only a couple of hours of restless sleep, it took her a minute to process the

information. *She's here. But is she here to talk or to say goodbye? We have to work this out. We just have to. I don't want to lose her over this.*

Pulling on her robe, Shine bypassed her slippers and padded out to the kitchen. She found Maureen slumped over the breakfast bar, a cup of coffee at her elbow. Red, tearful eyes turned towards her and her heart nearly broke in two.

"I'm so sorry," Maureen said as she began to cry.

"You?" Now Shine felt lower than dirt.

"I never should have shut you out like that," Maureen wept. "You had every right to go see her and I should have..."

"Stop." Shine was shaking her head in disbelief. "Just stop."

A shaking hand covered Maureen's mouth, but the pain and fear in her eyes was crystal clear.

Tears rolled down Shine's face. "This is all my fault. All of it."

Now Maureen looked confused.

Shine wiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands and took hold of her courage. "It's all my fault and I'm so sorry that I hurt you. I never wanted to do that. Not to you. I love you, Maureen, and I'm asking you to forgive me."

Maureen's hand lowered. "I...I don't understand. What are you saying?"

Shine took a deep breath. It was so hard to lay it all out there, not knowing if Maureen would still want her.

"Come here." Maureen patted the stool next to her. "Come sit down and we'll talk. Okay? Please?"

The instant they were within reach of each other, they found themselves in an embrace. Shine held her love close and cried softly. "I'm so sorry. Please don't leave me. I love you so much."

"I'm not going to leave you, baby. I just...I'm confused. Why are you sorry?"

"Because I'm an idiot."

Maureen pulled back and wiped tears from Shine's face. "I thought I was the idiot."

Shine shook her head with a rueful smile. "Nope. It's me."

"Well, I'm not going to argue with you about it, but I would like you to explain it to me. Can you

do that?"

Shine tried to explain. "It took me most of the night, but I figured out why I really went to see her." The warmth of Maureen's touch on her face gave her the strength to go on. "First, I never had the chance to understand why Debra killed herself. There was no note, no talking first, no nothing. She was just *dead* and I've never understood why she did it. And then there was Leah. She never wanted to talk about why we couldn't live together and be more than fuck buddies. I wanted to see Beth in hopes that I *would* understand this time. Not just why she attacked us in the club, but why she hurt you to begin with."

"I thought you were checking out my story. I thought you didn't trust me and I thought she would tell you things out of context and it would scare you or hurt you."

"She tried," Shine confessed. "But while I was sitting here waiting for you to come home, I had a chance to process the experience and gain perspective. She speaks with such venom that you only hear the injustice while you're with her. But if you take her words apart later and examine them...I know why she did it, Maureen."

"And you believe what she said?"

Shine looked into the brown eyes that were becoming her home. "She didn't tell me, I figured it out."

Maureen sighed. "Go ahead."

"I don't know why, but Beth is damaged. She seems larger than life on the outside-she's pretty, articulate and forceful-but on the inside, she's very small. She feels empty and she needs other people to fill her up. I'll bet no matter how much you gave to her-whether it was material, emotional or sexual-the next day she needed as much again plus a little more. Nothing was ever enough. Am I right?"

Maureen's eyes were beginning to fill with tears. "That's what it felt like."

"Okay," Shine said confidently. "Now you, on the other hand, *are* larger than life. You're stunningly beautiful. You are intelligent and successful and you have a prestigious position in the community. You are kind and generous and loving. But, perhaps most importantly, you have *presence*. People like to be around you. You make them feel cared about." Maureen's face turned away and Shine turned her back. "Beth liked that. But after a while she discovered that it wasn't enough and she needed more to fill up the emptiness she felt. She was hoping that you would give her some of what made you so special, but it doesn't work like that. When she realized this-subconsciously, of course-she began trying to make you small like she is. If she could make you feel smaller, it would make her feel bigger."

Maureen was crying silently now and Shine adjusted her stool so she could hold her. "She probably started by manipulation. Telling you that if you loved her you would do or give or be something that she wanted. You did things that were inconvenient and possibly even unpleasant

in an attempt to prove that you really did love her. She drove your friends away so that your only focus would be her. She didn't want you to give to others what she so desperately wanted for herself."

Shine wiped Maureen's tears away tenderly. "She also started to make you feel guilty and perverted for things that sound perfectly normal to me." Maureen went limp and cried into her shoulder. "My point is, she discovered that she felt better making you small than she did when you gave to her freely. When you finally gave up and tried to break it off with her, she lashed out. In her mind, it was self-defense. She can't see that she's the one who initiated the abuse and you were the one defending yourself."

Shine pulled back just a bit and used part of her robe to dry Maureen's tears. "And now you're worried that she was right about some things and that I'll be afraid or disgusted."

Maureen nodded through her sniffles and Shine wanted to laugh in relief. "I don't know how much of what she said was the truth and I don't care. I trust you, love. Tie me up, tie me down, paint me blue and run me naked through the Village Square. I've been around the block, too, you know." She cocked her head for effect. "Not recently, of course..." Shine grinned as Maureen began to smile. "I might even like a few things you haven't tried yet."

Shine smiled at the embarrassed chuckle and then became serious again. "There was another reason I went."

Maureen's smile faded. "What was it?"

"Curiosity." Shine moved on quickly. "I knew you didn't want me to see her when I talked to you on the phone. I told myself that I had ethical reasons for wanting to meet her and that it was important, but that was bullshit. I lied to myself and to you. Then, I ignored your wishes on the matter. You're more important to me than anything else in the world and I blew your concerns off without a second thought. I don't have any excuse. All of this was my fault. If I'd been paying attention to what's most important to me, none of this would have ever happened. I'm so sorry, honey. I don't blame you if you never forgive me. I don't deserve it."

Maureen was shaking her head and she placed her fingers over Shine's lips. "No, baby. You can't take all the blame for this. I had a hand in it, too. I should not have shut you out like that. You did what you thought was right for you. Even if it turned out that your motives were not as noble as you hoped, you had a right to see her and I should have trusted you."

"Well, I've not always been very trustworthy, so maybe you were justified."

"Stop that," Maureen said with a scowl. "I hate it when you do that. Debra is dead because she *wanted* to be dead. You were an excuse and you need to get over it. When I look at you, I do not think about what happened with her. Do you look at me and think about what Beth did to me? Is that who I am to you?"

"No," Shine protested.

Maureen poked a finger into Shine's chest. "Debra used you. She didn't love you. You've suffered her ghost long enough. You're mine now. You got that?"

Shine knew she would have a bruise on her chest the next day, but it was worth it. "Yes, dear."

"You have to stop defining yourself through other people's actions. You did not happen to Debra. She happened to you."

"Okay."

Maureen opened her hand and lay it over Shine's heart. Her eyes softened as she looked up into blue eyes. "Are we okay?"

"God, I hope so."

Maureen smiled. "Me, too."

Shine stood up and stepped into the vee of Maureen's legs. Her hands went to the curly mass of hair and she pressed a kiss to the smooth forehead. "I called in last night and asked for a personal day off work. Can you spend it with me?"

"Yes."

Shine could feel Maureen's hands opening her robe and her heart began to beat faster. "We have to go out at some point. I promised Stan I would stop by this morning. I'm going to tell him to offer Beth three to six years. If she doesn't take it, I want to go to court and try for the longer term. Is that going to be a problem for you if it gets in the papers?"

"No."

Soft kisses began to pepper her breasts and it took all of her will to stay on topic. "Is there anything else we should do while we're out?"

"My car is ready," Maureen murmured.

Shine closed her eyes to bliss. "We also need to hire some movers to bring the rest of your things. I don't want you to keep your other place."

"Umm hmm."

Shine tilted Maureen's face up and spoke into her mouth. "One more thing, love." Maureen's breath was fast and shallow and Shine felt the familiar tingling begin on the top of her head. "No more running away. For either of us."

"I love you, baby."

EPILOGUE

Not since she was a child had Maureen experienced this degree of electrical, bone-shattering excitement. It was still almost a week before Christmas, but Shine's present would be here in a few minutes and this was one gift that would not wait. Having waited almost three weeks for this day, Maureen was at the limit of her endurance. Shine's voice on the radio just made the anticipation harder to bear.

With no other preparations to make, she compulsively straightened ornaments on their tree. Shine had gone all out for Christmas. Her rationale had been that since she had not celebrated Christmas for many years, she had a lot to make up for. The front yard alone was almost psychotic with decorations and lights. A steady parade of cars and passersby made a quiet evening at home almost impossible. Shine had just the night before taken to handing out candy canes and asking for advice about next year.

Shine's penchant for solitude seemed to have taken a dramatic swing and Maureen wondered when she would settle down. It seemed they had a party of some sort every two weeks and three nights out of seven Shine would invite someone over to a casual dinner. If Maureen had not enjoyed making new friends it might have bothered her, but Shine never neglected her and always took responsibility for any cooking, cleaning or planning that might be involved.

The only thing that concerned her from time to time was Shine's belief that having so recently been one of the walking wounded, she could slip back into her old habits and become another Beth. Maureen was horrified to learn that Shine thought it was possible she could be anything like Beth and they had argued about it fiercely. In the end, Shine had decided to take steps to avert the likelihood and was now seeing a therapist once a week. Maureen didn't know if it was necessary, but Shine seemed to find it helpful, so she gave it her full support.

The only other quarrel that had marred their first months together was about Shine's inheritance. Maureen had come home one day to find a new deed to the house with her name on it and an array of credit cards in her name that provided her with access to Shine's millions. She had been too proud and angry to accept them at first, but over the course of several days she had come to realize that her real issue was that she didn't trust herself with so much money. Shine had reasoned that she was married in her heart and if you didn't put everything you were and everything you had into the relationship, you were creating avenues of dissatisfaction. After days of arguing, Shine's tears were the catalyst for Maureen's acceptance of the cards. It just got to the point that she couldn't bear to see her crying anymore. In the three months since that conflict, this gift was the first time she had used any of the cards.

When the cab finally pulled up to the curb, Maureen wanted to appear elegant and dignified, but she yipped like a little dog and ran down the walk. The children exited the cab first. Having talked to them on the phone, she knew their names and greeted them enthusiastically.

"Hello, Jenny. You look just like your mama did as a child. You have the same beautiful eyes and hair." She restrained herself from sweeping the 11-year-old girl into a hug and merely laid a hand on her shoulder.

"And Alec! Oh my, but you're a handsome one. Look how tall you are!" At 14, he was even more reticent and she shook his hand. "I'm so glad you're here."

Maureen looked up to see their mother coming around the cab. All of her features had matured and she was magnificent. They had talked often on the phone setting up this trip and Maureen felt like she was welcoming an old friend. "Grace. I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you."

Grace was on the verge of tears. "It's so great to finally see you."

Maureen stepped into her arms and held her tightly. "I thought you'd never get here."

"Is she home?"

"Not yet, but soon." Releasing her, Maureen stepped back. "Come. Let's get your things inside and I'll show you to your rooms."

With the help of the cab driver, all of their belongings were carried inside. Maureen gave them a quick tour of the house and showed them where they would be sleeping.

"This is my room?" Jenny asked with awe.

"Of course." Maureen smiled at how quickly she had become accustomed to living in such a beautiful house. She could see the expressions of awe on all their faces and wished Shine had been able to see it, too. It felt good to be able to offer such comfort and beauty to others.

She came out of Alec's room after explaining the cable set-up and found Grace at the stereo listening to Shine.

"It's her, isn't it?"

"Yes," Maureen said proudly.

"She sounds so grown up."

She put her arm around the exotic beauty. "Don't worry, Grace. She hasn't grown up *that* much. She has a playful streak a mile wide and I don't think she'll seem so different once you've had a chance to get reacquainted."

"Are you sure she wants to see me?"

Maureen couldn't help but smile. "I've got five bucks says she'll wet her pants."

Grace laughed. "You're on." She reached out and took Maureen's hand. "I can never thank you for this."

Maureen laughed. "You don't need to. I expect Shine will thank me plenty. Just make yourself at home and let us spoil you rotten."

Grace looked around the room. "You have a beautiful home."

"It's Shine's, actually."

"She's done well for herself then."

Maureen could see the question in Grace's eyes and decided to let Shine explain. "She would have traded all of it, at any time, to see you again. I can't tell you how much pleasure it gives me to be able to make this happen for you both."

She felt a tug on her arm and looked down at Jenny. "What is it, dear?"

"Is there something wrong with your dog?"

Maureen stifled a laugh at the youngster's similarity to Shine. "Her name is Mabel and she's only a statue."

Jenny looked confused. "But she has a bed and lots of toys."

"Shine likes to pretend she's real. I think she's practicing to have a real dog."

"Oh." Jenny looked uncertainly at her mother before asking, "Can I play with her?"

"Of course, honey." Maureen watched her approach Mabel cautiously.

Grace leaned over to speak quietly. "She's been bugging me for a dog for years."

"Don't tell Shine that," Maureen chuckled. "By the way, if you don't decide on limits before Shine gets it into her head to buy them Christmas presents, you may need a moving van to get it all home."

Grace grinned. "Thanks for the warning."

Maureen heard Shine over the radio again and checked the time. "She's signing off now so she'll be home in 15 minutes."

"Is there a certain way you want to present us?"

"Well, I thought the kids first, but Jenny looks just like you at that age. She's going to recognize her immediately. Maybe I should meet her outside and let her see you all at once."

Maureen talked it over with them all and when Shine's new SUV pulled into the driveway, she hurried out to meet her. "Hi, baby."

Shine got out of the vehicle and took her hand. She was always mindful of Maureen's reputation and tried to be discreet where the neighbors could see. "How was your day?"

"Exciting. I have something to tell you and you have to promise not to be mad."

Shine looked at her with trepidation. "I'll try."

Maureen wanted to run in circles, screaming. "I met a mother and her two children today and they don't have any family to spend Christmas with."

"Do you want to invite them to Christmas dinner?"

She stopped walking at the porch steps and tried to appear nervous. "They were sort of lost, so I invited them to stay with us over the holidays. We have the spare bedrooms and no one else is using them."

Shine stared at her in disbelief. "You mean they're going to live with us?"

"Just over Christmas. I know I should have asked first, but they're so sweet and I know you'll like them. If it doesn't work out we can always put them up in a hotel, but I hope you'll give them a chance."

Shine sighed. "Let me get this straight. You took the day off work to go shopping and just happened to stumble across a lost mother and her children with no family to take them in and you want them to stay with us over Christmas."

Maureen batted her eyes. "Please, baby?"

"You know how weird this sounds, don't you?"

"It's the truth. I swear it."

Shine studied her face for a moment. "Okay. I'll meet them and we'll see how it goes."

Maureen let out the smile that she had been hiding. "You won't be sorry, babe. You'll see." She led Shine up the steps and opened the front door. Alec and Jenny stood in the middle of the living room with cryptic smiles. "This is Alec," she said lightly, "and this is his sister, Jenny. Alec and Jenny, this is Shine."

"Hey," Shine said with warmth. "I hear you're going to be staying with us for a bit."

"Yes, ma'am," Alec said.

"Maureen invited us," Jenny added.

Shine extended her hand and shook Alec's, then Jenny's. Maureen held her breath as the slim, blond woman froze with her gaze on the young girl.

Shine's tone of voice was perplexed. "You look like someone I used to know."

Grace's voice slid into the silence. "She looks like me."

Maureen felt tears running down her face as Shine slowly turned to see her long lost cousin entering the room. Incredulous joy spread over her face. "Amazin' Grace?"

Grace rounded the edge of the couch. "It's me, Monkeyshines."

Both women burst into tears as their arms were flung about one another. Maureen knew that it would be some time before she and the children were included in their homecoming. Not wanting them to feel left out while Shine and Grace cried on each other, Maureen put an arm around each child.

"So, tell me. What would you two like on your pizza?"

THE END

This is the first story I've written. I hope you like it. Thanks to Dawnsue for the encouragement. If you're lucky, maybe she'll submit some of her own stories.