

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part One

"Holy crap!" Sarah compared the address in her notes to the brass plate on the elaborate wrought-iron gate. "This can't be right." On the other side of the gate was what could only be described as a mansion complete with pillars. It was *huge*. The idea of driving her battered Celica up to that monstrosity for a job interview was daunting.

Sarah knew in a flash that she would never be hired. Servility was just not in her nature and her defiance usually manifested itself verbally. Accepting that she would be turned away, Sarah decided that this might be her only chance to see the inside of a house like this. She pulled up to the call box and pushed the Talk button.

"Yes?" The voice was an almost sub-audible bass and stretched the limits of the small speaker's abilities.

Clearing her throat, she said, "My name is Sarah Wylie. I have an appointment for a job interview."

The gate began to swing slowly inward. "Parking is available to the left of the house. You will be met at the front door."

Sarah stifled a laugh. "Thank you." She'd be lucky to make it *through* the front door. Somebody was sure to come out and tell her that she was not what the owner had in mind and would she please get her piece of crap car off the estate.

She drove slowly, enjoying the landscaping. It was impossible to tell how much acreage was contained within the stone walls, but every inch of what she could see was carefully tended. The lawn could have graced a world class golf course and the trees appeared to have been groomed for effect. Off to one side was a charming little gazebo in the midst of flowering bushes. Sarah shook her head. She could have easily spent most of the day exploring the grounds alone.

She parked next to an expensive looking black Mercedes just for the fun of it. Her little red Toyota looked especially pathetic and she wondered if the owner of the Benz was watching out a window to see if she was going to dent the door. Sarah was grinning when she stepped out of her car. This had ceased to be a job interview and instead became a farcical adventure.

Figuring her purse would be safe, Sarah left it in the passenger seat of her car and headed for the front steps. The house was much larger than it appeared from the road and it loomed over her as she walked between smooth marble columns.

The door opened before she could knock and the open space was filled with the biggest, blackest man she had ever seen. At five foot five and 126 pounds, Sarah was dwarfed. He had to be closer to seven feet tall than six and she estimated his weight at well over 300 pounds. He wasn't fat by any means. His shoulders and chest were straining the seams of his black suit, but his hips were comparatively slim. His head was clean-shaven and he was so obviously meant to be threatening that Sarah couldn't help but giggle. She might have been intimidated but for his warm, liquid eyes.

She put her hand out. "Hi. I'm Sarah Wylie."

His hand swallowed hers and his voice rumbled more impressively than the gate speaker had allowed. "Mr. Crisp is expecting you, Miss Wylie."

"Oh, please," she laughed. "I just got here. I can't be in trouble already. Call me Sarah."

The big man smiled back. "Very well, Sarah. My name is Pete. If you'll follow me?"

Sarah stepped past him into the house and froze. "Wow." It was too much to take in all at once. A massive chandelier hung twenty feet or more above the tiled floor and a long, curved staircase of dark, polished wood ran along one wall. Antique tables with vases, figurines and flowers seemed to be everywhere. Prominent on one wall was a very old photograph of a nude woman

blown up to near life size. As beautiful as the model was, Sarah was too overwhelmed by the opulence around her to really study it. "Wow," she repeated.

Rooms opened off to the sides of the entryway and Sarah went to the closest one. She stood in the open door and glanced around what looked like a living room. Not any living room she had ever been in before, granted, but she could imagine people sitting in it and visiting after dinner.

"Mr. Crisp is waiting," Pete rumbled behind her.

Sarah jumped to his side and let him lead the way. "Are you the butler?"

His chuckle reverberated off the walls. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"I've never met a butler before," Sarah admitted. "Do you like your job?"

He nodded. "It's the best job I've ever had."

"What do you do when you aren't answering the door?"

Pete smiled down at her with his even white teeth. "I coordinate the staff and take care of scheduling."

As unlikely as it was, Sarah asked, "So, if I get hired you'll be my supervisor?"

"Marginally, yes."

Sarah kept one eye on the rooms they passed and the other on Pete. "Why aren't you the one doing the interview?"

He just smiled at her and stopped at a door. He knocked twice and opened it. "Your interview is here, Mr. Crisp."

"Show her in."

The voice was smooth and in the high tenor range. Sarah stepped inside and halted in confusion. A tall, slim woman was coming around the side of an ornate desk to shake her hand. She was dressed in slacks, shirt sleeves and a sweater vest and her hair was brutally short, but Sarah knew instantly that she was looking at a woman. She took the offered hand in her own and knew she was right from the softness of the skin. "*Mr.* Crisp?"

"Miss Wylie."

"Sarah," she corrected automatically.

"Sarah, then. Thanks, Pete."

"You're welcome, sir." The big man quietly left the room and closed the door.

Mr. Crisp pointed at a chair and Sarah used the time getting comfortable to rearrange her perceptions. If *Mr.* Crisp wanted everyone to think she was a man it was none of Sarah's business. Besides, rich people were supposed to be eccentric, weren't they? It could even be that Mr. Crisp was transgendered. Maybe he *used to be* a woman. Sarah relaxed. That had to be it and, as such, it would be inappropriate for her to continue to think of him as a woman.

"You have a beautiful home," she said as Mr. Crisp sat.

"Thank you. Perhaps, if things work out, you'll get a tour." Mr. Crisp opened a file on his desk and looked at it briefly before sitting back. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

Sarah nodded. "I'm an only child from a small town upstate and I'm a senior at the University. I'm majoring in Small Business Administration." She didn't know what else to say so she fell silent.

Mr. Crisp hesitated a moment. "I did a little checking," he said evenly. "You're an honor student currently ranked fifth in your class. You won a 'full-ride' scholarship on academics. Very impressive."

"Thank you," she said for lack of anything better to say. She hadn't known her ranking and it surprised her that she was so high.

"Why did you choose Business Administration?"

Feeling like she had nothing to lose, Sarah told the truth. "I want to be in control of my life. I don't like feeling that I don't have choices and I don't like being bossed around. I tend to shoot my mouth off and if I want steady employment, I'll have to be my own boss."

Mr. Crisp smiled. "That sounds reasonable. May I ask why you aren't in a sorority?"

"I'm here to get an education," Sarah explained. "There are certain advantages to being a member of a sorority down the line, but I decided I didn't need the parties and the frat boys taking time away from my studies."

"Why are you looking for work?"

Sarah folded her hands in her lap. "I'm tired of living in the dorm and trading my spare time working in the student union for meals. It's easy and convenient, but it lacks privacy and it makes me feel dependent. I graduate next summer and I'll be totally on my own for the first time. It seems to me that my future would be best served if I can get a foot out the door while I still have some security to fall back on. There won't be any place to go when I graduate and I'd just as soon be ready." Mr. Crisp was nodding with seeming approval. "I found your ad for a housekeeper posted on the job board outside the student union. I was interested primarily because of the flexible hours, the room option and the generous salary."

"You're very straight forward," Mr. Crisp said.

Sarah shrugged. "I don't have anything to lose. I can afford to be."

He cocked his head with interest. "Why don't you have anything to lose?"

Sarah gestured to include the house. "I can't see myself fitting in here, can you? I'm sorry to be wasting your time like this, but I really wanted an opportunity to see the inside of your house."

Mr. Crisp leaned forward. "Why wouldn't you fit in here? Why do you say that?"

"I'm not the servant type," Sarah admitted. "I have problems with authority."

Mr. Crisp laughed easily. "I don't need a servant. I need a housekeeper. If you aren't interested, I'll get Pete to show you around. If you are, I have some more questions."

Sarah suddenly realized that she was being awfully flippant to a prospective employer and she straightened up. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Sarah. I *like* your attitude and moxie is a job requirement. I just need to know if you're serious about getting a job."

"Very."

"Okay." He leaned back over the file and studied it. "I see you turned twenty-one last month. Congratulations." He grinned up at her. "Did you go out and get drunk?"

"No," Sarah admitted. She neglected to say that the friends she had were not the kind of friends she could go drinking with. They were her study buddies only. "I did buy a bottle of wine, but I haven't opened it yet."

"Saving it for a special occasion?"

Sarah grinned. "I forgot to buy a corkscrew."

Mr. Crisp chuckled. "I take it you don't have a drinking problem then."

"Not at the moment."

"Drugs?"

"I've never felt the need to do drugs."

"Good." He turned a page. "You're carrying a very full load of classes. Are you going to be able to juggle school, studying and work?"

"Absolutely. I started working at fourteen in a burger stand and managed to win a scholarship at the same time. The last three years have been almost too easy."

Mr. Crisp flipped through a couple of pages and pulled one out. "Jimmy's Burger Shack. He gives you a stellar recommendation."

Sarah frowned. She had only called for an appointment yesterday. The fact that Mr. Crisp already had a file on her was a little disconcerting. "Where did you get all of that information? What does it include?"

"I believe I mentioned on the phone yesterday that I would do a security check. The recommendation was received by fax only this morning, and the rest of this was taken from the Internet." Mr. Crisp went page by page and handed each to her as he read them off. "You've never had a ticket or an accident. Your credit is good, if sparse. This is your transcript from the University and this one is from your high school. Near perfect marks all around. In high school, you played tennis, belonged to all of the academic clubs, and you were captain of the chess club, but you haven't joined any groups or extracurricular activities at the University."

"I thought this information was private," Sarah said.

"Nothing is private anymore," Mr. Crisp replied. "It's scary, isn't it?"

Sarah nodded. "It's not that I have anything to hide, but it is a little scary." She handed the papers back to him reluctantly.

"Do you have any objections to housekeeping?" he asked.

Sarah shook her head. "It's not *what* you do for a living that matters. Only that you take pride in doing it well."

Mr. Crisp closed the file and leaned back in his leather chair. "Do you have any questions?"

Sarah blinked. "Are you seriously considering me for the job?"

"Yes."

Leaning back with a sigh, Sarah put her mind to it. "I need to know more about the job. How many hours; which days; how flexible-that sort of thing."

"I have a handful of rooms upstairs that need to be cleaned after parties. In a normal week I'd need your services on Saturday, Sunday and Monday, but occasionally the party lasts all weekend and you'd only work after the party ended. My guests do a lot of the cleanup themselves. Your job would be to make sure it's done right. It's very detailed work and depending on how many guests I've had-can take anywhere from two to eight hours per day to complete."

Sarah nodded. "What's the salary?"

She almost choked on her own spit when Mr. Crisp named a figure. "Of course," he continued, "that amount drops by a third if you elect to live on the estate. But it includes all of your utilities and cable and such. Pete has all of those details."

"I'd be living here in the house?"

"No. There are cottages out back." Mr. Crisp waved at the roof over his head. "They are nothing like this, of course, but they are clean, comfortable and, if you wish, fully furnished."

Sarah couldn't believe her luck. She briefly wished she could start the whole interview over. "What exactly is the nature of the parties? I mean, this seems a little too good to be true."

Mr. Crisp steepled his fingers. "Here's where it gets a little tricky."

Sarah waited for the bad news.

"I've interviewed four people for this job so far. All were students, by the way. You seem to be the most likely candidate. I'd be happy to show you the cottage that's currently available and allow you to talk to some of my employees to ease your concerns. But, before I can discuss the job particulars with you I'll need you to sign a confidentiality agreement. It does not bind you to any obligations in regard to the position; only to the information I need to provide you with regarding your duties here. *If* you decide to accept."

Sarah felt suddenly nervous and unsure. "A confidentiality agreement?"

"Yes. Would you like to read it?"

Sarah nodded and a simple form was handed to her. It seemed pretty straightforward. She couldn't discuss Mr. Crisp, his employees, the guests or any activities of the house with anyone except those people. It also had a clause specifically releasing her from the agreement if she were to witness any illegal activities. That last bit eased some of her fears. "I've never had to sign one of these before. Did the other applicants sign them, too?"

"I didn't offer them the chance."

"Why me?" She couldn't help asking. "You've hardly asked me anything."

Mr. Crisp smiled at her. "As I mentioned before, I like your attitude. You have spirit. I like that in my employees. If I wanted people who would run around kissing my butt, I could have them by the truckload, but that kind of person usually tends to stab one in the back at the earliest opportunity. I'd rather have staff who aren't afraid to speak their minds: people who can think for themselves. People who stand up for themselves."

Sarah looked down at the paper in her hand. "How likely is it that I'll see something illegal?"

"Not very," Mr. Crisp said easily. "Privacy is *highly* valued here. That clause helps to insure that my guests will be on their best behavior."

Curiosity prompted Sarah to sign the paper. Mr. Crisp's signature was all but unreadable. He ran it through a fax machine and gave her the copy.

"So, what's the big secret?"

Mr. Crisp picked up a pen and began weaving it dexterously through his long fingers. "How do you feel about BDSM?"

"What's BDSM?"

Mr. Crisp smiled with one side of his full mouth. "Sadomasochism. Dominance. Bondage. Submission."

"Um." Sarah tried desperately to think of a casual response and came up empty. "I don't think it's legal for you to ask me something like that."

"It's not," he admitted. "Your sexual proclivities are none of my business. But, the question is relevant. How do you feel about it?"

Sarah didn't want to appear as young and naive as she felt. "I suppose I don't really have an opinion as yet. Everything I know about it has been gleaned from television and veiled reference and I've learned to take that kind of information with a grain of salt." She swallowed nervously. "If participation in S&M is a part of the job, I'd like to know up front. I don't want to waste any more of your time."

Mr. Crisp nodded as if pleased. "Participation is not required and, in fact, is generally discouraged amongst my staff. I hate to go to all the work of hiring and training good people only to have to train their replacements when they decide to become players."

"Players?"

Mr. Crisp stood up and moved around the desk to sit on a leather love seat. He crossed one long leg over the other and set a boot to swinging idly. "I make a portion of my home available to select members of the community who wish to indulge in scenes of BDSM with other like minded people. We like to call each other 'players'." He was watching Sarah intently. "Such a mild, almost lighthearted word for the degenerate, morally reprehensible things we do together, don't you think?"

Sarah turned in her chair to face him more directly. "If that's how you feel about it, why do you allow it in your home?"

"It's not how I feel," he clarified. "It's how society teaches us to feel about it. Pain is perceived as bad, so those who engage in it for sexual reasons must be bad. Maybe our brains perceive pain differently and it feels like pleasure to us. More likely, we are all budding serial killers or rapists. Some think that we must have been abused as children and are incapable of giving and receiving love and tenderness to each other because we are emotionally handicapped. Perhaps we worship Satan. There are as many reasons as there are people. I'm sure you have your own preconceived notions."

Sarah wasn't sure why she was going to come out, but her instincts were screaming for her to do it. "It's not really my place to judge. I'm perceived as a pervert myself because I'm a lesbian, so I'm inclined to embrace those who are different. If for no other reason, then for the moral support. I will admit, however, that...BDSM... makes me a little uncomfortable."

"That's perfectly understandable. I appreciate your honesty."

"So." She had expected more reaction to her coming out, but he didn't seem to have any feelings about it either way. "The job is cleaning up the rooms after they play?"

"Yes, it is. Are you still interested?"

Sarah couldn't help a grimace. "Are we talking about blood and fluids everywhere?"

Mr. Crisp smiled gently. "It's not as bad as you think. You *will* come in contact with a variety of bodily fluids, but most of the time you won't be aware of it. Bloodletting is not allowed here and condoms are required. If you take the job, you'll be trained to clean safely-not only for the benefit of the players, but for yourself as well. Everyone is screened every three months for sexually transmitted diseases and so far we've been extremely fortunate. Our continued safety will rest almost entirely in your hands. That's why it pays as much as it does. Peoples lives will count on you and your attention to detail. Are you up to that kind of responsibility?"

Sarah took a moment to consider. She knew the responsibility was not an issue for her. She had worked with people's food for years and had taken it very seriously. This wouldn't be much different. Her concern was that she was going to be exposing herself to a very different kind of life and she had to be concerned with how it would affect her future. Would it work against her at some point? The money was great. If the house were any indication, the cottage would be more than good enough. She was only twenty-five minutes from school and she couldn't beat the hours. But, was she willing to clean up after a sex club? How would that look on her resume? Everything else about it was perfect.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled at Mr. Crisp. "I'll be very good at this job. You can't afford to let me get away."

"Excellent," he chuckled. "But, before you decide, let's take a walk. You should see the rooms you'll be cleaning and I expect you'd like a look at the cottage."

Sarah had to trot to keep up as Mr. Crisp led her back to the entry hall and up the grand staircase.

"I'm sorry if I was a bit belligerent earlier," she explained to his back. "It's just that I saw this house and I got it in my head that you would never hire me and I got defensive."

"No offense was taken," he said easily. Stopping at a set of doors, he considered her seriously. "This will seem frightening and intimidating to one who's never seen it before. I assure you that everything that takes place here is consensual. No one is forced to come here and no one is ever prevented from leaving. *You* are completely safe here. If it will make you feel more comfortable, I'll stay out here and let you look around on your own. I tend to make people nervous."

Sarah smiled up at him. "It's sweet of you to offer, but I'm not afraid of you."

One of Mr. Crisp's eyebrows jerked upwards in surprise and he nodded. "Very well."

At first glance it was just a large room. Sarah made it about three steps inside before the bottom dropped out of her stomach and all of her hair stood up. Maybe it was the high ceiling that made the room look larger, but it was at least seventy feet on a side, if not more. In the center of the room was a sitting area with couches and love seats and that was the first thing Sarah saw. Once inside her eyes were drawn to other things.

Along the edges of the room was an odd array of devices. Work out benches, medical exam tables, gymnastic vaults, small tables and things she didn't know the names of filled up all of the empty spaces any normal room would have. Everything had cuffs, straps and tie-downs on it. It was perfectly clear to her what it was all for.

On the walls there were pictures of people in bondage and every imaginable kind of paddle, whip, cane and crop. In spite of being terrified, Sarah could appreciate that this was probably an impressive collection. Intimidating was a very mild term for what this room made her feel.

"Breathe, Sarah." Mr. Crisp's voice was low and gentle, but insistent. "Deep breaths. In through your nose and out through your mouth."

Suddenly aware that she was hyperventilating, Sarah shook the tension from her arms like drops of water and dropped into a breathing exercise she'd learned doing yoga. Born with a great deal of flexibility, she had started yoga on the advice of a high school gym teacher. She had kept at it because it made her feel good mentally as well as physically. Sarah started each day with a meditation/exercise ritual and she fell into the proper breathing patterns now with ease. Closing her eyes, she invited calm and balance in and expelled fear and conjecture.

"That's it," Mr. Crisp said quietly. "Nothing is happening and you are perfectly safe. You can leave whenever you like or you can stay for a while and look around. No one will touch you or harm you in any way. *You* are in control here. Very good. Take your time."

He soothed her like he was talking to a frightened animal, but Sarah was too grateful for the sound of his voice to be insulted. "I'll be okay," she said in a shaky tone.

"Of course you will. You're doing just fine. I know it's a bit of a shock seeing this for the first

time. It's meant to be as intimidating as possible. That's how we like it, but it makes it hard to prepare you for it. Even when you think you're prepared, it reaches into your primal mind and triggers things you haven't expected. What can I do to help you? Do you want to step outside for a minute? Would you like to sit down? May I offer you a sports drink or some juice?"

Sarah took a very deep breath and let it out slowly. She opened her eyes and headed for one of the love seats. "If I could just sit down for a moment."

"By all means."

Sitting helped a lot. She felt better almost immediately. Mr. Crisp handed her a small carton of orange juice a few seconds later. She felt a little embarrassed now. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to freak out."

He perched on the edge of the couch opposite of her with a grin. "You didn't freak out," he said. "I've had people I was interviewing throw up, pass out, run screaming and dissolve in tears. By comparison, you handled it extremely well. Much better than I expected, in fact. I thought you'd be a crier, but I was wrong. I freely admit that I'm impressed."

Sarah tried to laugh and an odd strangled sound came out. "Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"Is it working?"

He looked like a kid trying to charm his way out of trouble. "Yes."

"Good." He slid back on the couch and crossed his legs again. He appeared to be totally at ease and in control.

Sarah drank half of the juice before realizing she had opened it. The tart/sweet taste cleared her senses. "Thanks for the juice."

"You're very welcome. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Sarah rolled her head around on her neck. She couldn't sit there forever. "May I wander around a little bit?"

"Absolutely. And don't be afraid to ask questions."

Looking at the room again, Sarah noticed half a dozen archways in the side walls. Going to the first one, she looked inside and found a room with a platform type bed covered only by a white sheet, an easy chair and footstool, a pile of geometrically shaped cushions in a variety of sizes and eye bolts on and around everything. She assumed they were for tying things to. The second room was very similar. "These parties . . . ? I assume they are S&M parties?"

"You could say that, but not everyone plays with pain. It would be more accurate to call them

fantasy parties. Players arrange carefully scripted scenes with each other to challenge their beliefs, to explore their hidden demons, to stretch their boundaries, plain old curiosity or because it feels good. They have fun with sex, pain, pleasure, drama, fetishes, exhibitionism . . . you name it-someone's done it here."

Sarah set a paddle on the wall to swinging with one finger and looked sideways at the handsome man on the couch. "Don't tell me these are just decorations."

His grin was naughty, yet sophisticated. "No, they're not."

One of the rooms Sarah found had an entire wall of shelves filled with dildos. She knew what they were regardless of the fact she'd never actually seen one. It felt like suddenly finding yourself in a room full of sleeping snakes. One false move and your whole life would change. The sizes, colors and shapes were a revelation. Sarah thought a dildo was a thing, but apparently they were a *class* of things. Some of them even looked like glass! Others had knobs and pointy things on them that looked rather painful. A few were truly prodigious in size and made her stomach hurt just looking at them.

The opposite wall was a cabinet with a great many small drawers. Sarah pulled one open that said 'Alligators' and found what she'd always thought of as roach clips, except that these had some sort of black plastic on the teeth. It was a lot to take in all at once and her imagination needed some cooling down time before she started trying to understand, so she closed the drawer and backed out of the room. It would definitely take some time to get used to all of this.

"Are you doing alright?"

"I think so." There was an alcove on the back wall that held a refrigerator, a microwave and a sink. Beside it there was an unmarked door. "What's in there?"

"The cleaning station."

"Can I look?"

"Of course."

Inside was a room that finally made sense. Washer, dryer, dishwasher, vacuum, broom, duster, rags-these things she could understand. This room reduced all of what she had seen into terms she could deal with. This was about doing a job.

Out of sight of her prospective employer, Sarah rubbed her face vigorously and considered her situation. Great money, a place to live off campus, privacy and an easy job lay on one side of the scale. On the other was cleaning up after sex parties. She wanted all of the good things. All she had to do was find a way to deal with her preconceptions. She wouldn't be *doing* S&M. There was no shame in cleaning up after them and Sarah was leaning towards taking the job. Surely Mr. Crisp wouldn't tell any future employers *exactly* what kind of cleaning she would be doing. There was probably some fancy euphemism for it.

And then there was Mr. Crisp. She liked him. Maybe he was a woman and maybe he wasn't, but he was nice. It seemed like he had a good sense of humor. It might be fun to get to know him a little better. Pete looked like a fun time, too. Sarah might have some doubts about the nature of the work, but she had a good feeling about the people.

With a final cleansing breath, Sarah marched back to the love seat and sat down. "I think I'm okay with this. If you think I'm worth investing in, I'd very much like to be considered for the job."

Mr. Crisp smiled. It looked good on him. "No more questions?"

She was burning with questions, but she said, "Only work related ones. I assume those will be answered if you hire me."

He nodded and leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees. "I take my duties as an employer very seriously. Of all the positions I have on the estate, this one has turned out to be the most difficult one of all. Some of the people I've hired for this job can't take it. Men and women, both. Several of them claimed that the activities that take place here leave a 'psychic stain'. I know it sounds terribly new age, but I happen to agree with them. Some people are more sensitive to the aura than others. They find it difficult to cope with and they start breaking down. They can't sleep and dread coming to the house. They feel sick and start losing weight for no reason. Some get angry and start taking it out on others. Other people go through a brief period of confusion and then they suddenly come to terms with it and everything is fine. *Everyone* has a reaction of one sort or another. You will, too. It's important to me that you understand a few things going in."

His face was dead serious and Sarah could tell that he meant every word that he was saying. "First, if it turns out that you can't handle it, it's not a weakness in your character. It's a sensitivity of the heart. It's a *good* thing and you should not be embarrassed or ashamed by it. Don't let yourself become damaged emotionally because you're too proud to admit you need help. I'm available to talk whenever you need me. Second, I'm not heartless. If you can't do it, we'll either find you other work to do here on the estate or I'll help you find a job somewhere else that suits you better. You won't be put out on the street at the first sign of difficulty. You have my word. Third, as long as you do your best and honor the confidentiality agreement, you'll have a job here for as long as you want. But, if you put a word in the wrong ear or don't do your job well out of laziness, I'll fire you only minutes before I call my lawyers. I truly hope that I won't ever have to do that. If I thought it was at all likely, I would not be offering you the job. You seem like the kind of person we can trust."

Sarah nodded. It seemed to her that Mr. Crisp had just made a pact with her. If she did a good job and was loyal, he would look out for her and keep her best interests at heart. "It sounds like you take good care of your employees."

"If I expect them to be reliable, caring, honest and trustworthy, they have a right to expect the same from me. Money isn't enough. I need you strong, healthy and focused. If you're ever in

trouble or in doubt, come to me. I'm not your daddy-I won't take care of you-but I can be a very good friend."

"Thanks."

"Let's go see the cottage."

Sarah stopped running to keep up about halfway to the cottages. She let him stride on ahead and looked around. Trees hid the cottages from the house and gave them the semblance of a neighborhood. There were four cottages together, and each appeared to be nearly as big as the house she had grown up in. White picket fences surrounded them and she could see parking beyond. Mr. Crisp was headed for the one third in line and she was delighted to see it had a porch and a small lawn. She wanted to dance with happiness. It almost didn't matter what the inside was like. It would be her own little place-well, not so little-and she could hardly wait to move in. She thought it would be worth cleaning anything just to be able to call this place home.

He waited for her on the porch with the front door open. "You walk too fast," Sarah teased as she went inside.

"Sorry," he grinned from the porch railing. "It's a tall thing. I'm not in a hurry. Take your time."

Sarah looked around in extreme contentment. It was big. The furniture was pretty and clean. It had a desk big enough to hold her computer. It had lots of outlets, places to hang plants and there was a brand-new mattress-still in the plastic wrapper-on the queen size bed. There was no art on the walls, but Sarah was glad of that. It would have felt like a hotel room otherwise. The bathroom had lush white towels and a claw foot bathtub. The kitchen was ready to cook in and the dining room had an oak table and chairs that looked new. As a student, she didn't have much more than what she could carry, so having kitchen and bathroom stuff provided was a godsend.

"What do you think?" He asked when she finally came back outside.

"My parents don't live in a house this nice." She hugged herself happily. "Are you really offering me the job?"

"Yes."

"I'll take it."

Mr. Crisp nodded. "Are you free tomorrow for a physical?"

"Classes don't start till next week. I'm free all day."

"Okay," he said on an upbeat. "Pending the results of your tests, you're hired. I'll set up an appointment for you when we get back to the house and give you the doctor's address. The results should be back by Thursday. Provided you're healthy, you can start on Friday. Does that work for you?"

"Oh, yeah." Sarah wanted to dance for joy.

~***~

The physical took almost two hours. She had expected to have her blood pressure and temperature taken and probably a blood test, but she was checked out head to toe. The only really uncomfortable moment was the pelvic and PAP.

"Wait a minute," she said when she was told to lie back for it. "How much information will Mr. Crisp be getting about this exam?"

Doctor Danby was in her early forties and rather dry looking. "Mr. Crisp is paying for the results only. The details, if they do not impact on your ability to perform the job, are not part of what he will be provided. Is there something you wish to talk about?"

Sarah flushed head to toe. "I'm a virgin," she mumbled.

The doctor smiled with compassion. "Do you mean to say that you have never had a sexual partner or that you are intact?"

Sarah tried to talk out of the side of her mouth as if she could somehow deny that she was actually speaking. "I'm intact."

The doctor patted her knee. "Good for you." She nodded at her assistant who promptly left the room. "Mr. Crisp will not learn this from us. It has no bearing on the job. Have you had a pelvic exam before?"

"Yes. It was horrible."

"This one won't be. I promise. No one in their right mind enjoys these, but there's no reason in the world why it has to be a nightmare. The speculum comes in several different sizes and my nurse will bring one that shouldn't cause you too much trouble."

Sarah almost cried in relief when it was over. It had been only marginally uncomfortable. The last one she had gone through had left her bleeding for most of a day. This one was nothing in comparison.

Waiting until Thursday to hear back was hard. Sarah knew she was healthy and free of disease and she did everything she could to prepare for moving. All of her things were packed. She already had all of her books and supplies for the next semester and had notified her advisor and the dorm mother that she would probably be moving out. With all of the new students arriving, nobody seemed to care much one way or the other.

She was propped up on her bed in the late afternoon skimming the course book for her Business Ethics class when one of the new freshman girls-apparently under the impression that they were

all just one big happy family-opened her door without knocking and stepped inside. "You're Sarah Wylie, right?"

"Didn't your mother teach you to knock?" Sarah asked with indignation. "I could have been naked."

"Don't get all excited." This from an eighteen-year-old girl who probably still slept with a teddy bear clutched under her chin. "You haven't got anything I haven't got."

"Except manners," Sarah shot back. "What do you want?"

"Fine," the girl said dramatically as she backed out of the room. "From now on I'll just take messages and leave them on the board."

Sarah bolted off the bed and the girl squealed in fear before tearing off down the hall. Once in the hallway, she could see the payphone receiver dangling and she raced for it. "This is Sarah," she said.

"Good news," Mr. Crisp said brightly.

Sarah sighed in relief. "I knew I was clean," she said, "but thank God anyway."

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"Are you kidding?" Sarah looked around the dorm and could only think about getting out. "When can I move in?"

"Now, if you like."

"I'll be there in an hour and a half."

"Do you need any help moving?"

Sarah laughed. "I'm a student. Everything I own will fit in the back of my car."

"I remember those days," he chuckled. "Pete will meet you when you get here and see you get settled. He'll go over policies and procedures and get your paperwork started. He'll explain everything. Do you need an advance on your first paycheck for food and gas?"

"Nope. But thanks for offering."

"You bet. The first couple of days you'll be training with Emily. She likes to start at 9 in the morning. She'll meet you outside the dungeon tomorrow morning. I don't usually have parties on Thursday night, but it's a special birthday event."

"Hey, Mr. Crisp?" Sarah hunched over the phone for more privacy from the busy hallway. "I

can't thank you enough. *Really*. You don't know what this means to me."

"You're welcome, Sarah."

Sarah turned in a slow circle after hanging up and thrust her arms in the air. "You all can kiss my ass!" she yelled. "I'm outta here!"

She had all of her things in the car in seven trips and struggled to drive the speed limit to Mr. Crisp's estate. Pete gave her directions to the back gate and its code over the small speaker, then met her in the lot behind her new home. He helped her carry her things inside and they spent nearly an hour filling out forms for employment and the rental. He explained everything with great patience, gave her the house keys and her private phone number, shook her hand and left her alone.

Sarah didn't know what to do next. For the first time in her life she was really alone. Sure, there were people nearby, but she was in her own space and subject to her own rules now. No one was going to bust in unannounced and everything would be exactly where she left it. Aside from hanging her clothes up, she was reluctant to put anything else away. Things would find a place as she needed them.

She hooked her computer up and spent some time getting her study area set up with the printer. The bed was the next project and she pulled linens and blankets from a hall closet and put it together. Aside from the occasional sexual foray into motel rooms, she had never slept in a bed so large. She lay in the center of the bed and tried to envision inviting someone to share it with her.

Sarah had never been in love. Her entire focus since the first week of high school had been on getting a college education and away from her parents for good. Sex was a very satisfying distraction when stress built to an uncomfortable level, but a relationship was out of the question. She had learned in high school to be very up-front about the temporary nature of her liaisons. Girlfriends wanted more of her time and energy than she was willing to give. There would be plenty of time for love when she had her life under control.

At this point, sex was something she engaged in when the need arose. If she couldn't take care of her needs on her own, willing partners weren't hard to find. She could spot the dykes in bars and coffee houses that wanted sex free of involvement and could pretty much take her pick. She insisted on safe sex, which sometimes brought things to a screeching halt, but with the right attitude and enthusiasm most women were willing to try it. It amazed her how ignorant most lesbians were about safe sex. They seemed to think that they were immune to STDs because they couldn't get pregnant by accident. What the one had to do with the other Sarah didn't know, but she was determined not to be a victim of carelessness.

She couldn't remember when she had figured out that she was a lesbian. It seemed like it had always been who she was and it never occurred to her that she should question it. The subject had never come up with her parents. She had no idea if they knew, but suspected that they wouldn't have bothered caring. They had been only marginally less excited about her going off to

school than she had been. Sarah had never been close to her parents or them to her. They never came to Open House in grade school or to her school plays. They never attended anything that had been important to her. Their disinterest had stopped bothering her by the time she was ten. She had figured out by then that she was an accident and that they were only together because it was the 'right' thing to do. She had always known that they didn't love each other and were not particularly fond of her either. She hadn't spoken to them since leaving for college and sometimes wondered if they were even still together.

The doorbell rang and Sarah bounced off the bed. Her first visitor! She expected it to be Mr. Crisp, but there was a woman who looked like someone's grandmother on her porch with a big smile and a foil-covered tray. "Hi," Sarah said.

"Welcome to the neighborhood! My name is Maggie and I live next door. I thought you might like something warm to eat. Moving is such a bother."

Sarah could smell pot roast and potatoes as she took the tray. "It smells wonderful. Thank you very much." She glanced at her living room and back to her new neighbor. "Would you like to come in?"

"Only for a minute, dear. I know you're still settling in." Maggie walked inside and looked around. "Oh, good. They took down the awful pictures Tina had in here. Frightful things they were, too. She was very sweet, but Lord, that girl had the worst taste in art."

Sarah set her dinner on the dining table. "I'd offer you something to drink, but I think all I've got is water."

Maggie smiled and pulled two tea bags from her apron pocket. "Why don't you eat while it's hot and I'll make us some tea?"

Sarah didn't have much choice. Maggie made herself at home and Sarah pulled the foil from the tray to see what she had brought. It *was* pot roast with potatoes, carrots and pearl onions. There was also asparagus with a dollop of mayonnaise, buttered biscuits and a slice of apple pie.

The meat fell apart when she touched it with her fork and melted in her mouth. "Oh, Maggie, this is *wonderful*."

"Thank you, dear."

Sarah tasted each thing on the tray with perfect enjoyment. "This is absolutely the best food I've ever tasted. Will you marry me?" Maggie waved her off, but her round face held a pleased smile. "Do you work here, too?" she asked between bites.

"I cook for the Master."

Sarah grinned in incredulity. "The Master?"

Maggie shrugged. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but he *is* the Master of the house and the players."

"Does he prefer to be called that?"

Maggie snorted. "Lord, no! He hates it. Drives him completely crazy." She smiled with a definitely evil cast. "That's part of why I do it. He needs someone to keep him humble and I seem to have a knack for it."

Sarah laughed. "How long have you worked here?"

Maggie poured hot water into two mugs and carried them to the table. "Almost six years now. It doesn't seem that long really. Time changes texture as you get older."

"How did you come to work for Mr. Crisp?" she asked. "Don't take this wrong, but I'm surprised someone like you is willing to work for a man who runs a sex club."

Maggie patted her hand. "The Master didn't invent S&M, dear. It's been around since the beginning of time. Why, even I dabbled on the edges of it in my younger days. I admit I was shocked at first at how openly it was dealt with, but then-I've done some questionable things in my time.

"As to how I started working here?" She squeezed out her tea bag and set it on the corner of Sarah's tray before going on. "I worked as a secretary for nearly forty years in a construction company. I was all set to retire when the company up and went bankrupt. I didn't even see it coming. Personally, I think the son cleaned out the bank accounts and cooked the books, but I couldn't prove anything and my pension was gone."

"That doesn't sound legal," Sarah objected.

"I didn't think so either," Maggie agreed. "But, the lawyer I went to see said it was. I was already past retirement age so I knew I wouldn't be able to find another job, and even if I did, I wouldn't live long enough to earn another pension. I was left with Social Security and I knew I was going to end up in a rest home while I waited to die."

Sarah waved her fork in a circle to prompt her. "What happened?"

Maggie sighed. "I fell apart. I sat in the lawyer's office and started bawling. I didn't know what else to do. Everything I had worked for was gone and I felt more lost and afraid than I had ever felt in my life. I had no family or children to go to and the few friends I had weren't in positions to help. Security came and they carried me out of the office and left me in the hallway. I'm ashamed to say that I sat down on the floor and bawled my eyes out."

She smiled then and her eyes lit up. "Next thing I knew, a beautiful young man sat down beside me and let me cry on his shoulder."

"Mr. Crisp?"

Maggie nodded and there were tears in her eyes. "He listened to my story and asked me if I was a good cook." She patted her ample belly. "I used this as my reference and he hired me on the spot. He promised me that I would always have a place to live and people who would care about me. He takes care of all my medical bills and sends me on a two-week cruise every year, plus I get spending money. I'd do anything for him."

Sarah smiled. It was a lovely story. "Is he a good person?"

"Probably the best person I ever met," Maggie said tenderly. "I know what goes on upstairs. I've seen people carried out the front door because they're too weak or too hurt to walk. None of that matters. The Master has a heart of gold and he shares it at the drop of a hat. He pays for everything, you know. The players don't pay for a thing."

"But," Sarah said with a hitch, "I thought that's how he made a living."

"No, dear. I still don't know how he got his start, but he owns stock in computer games and game systems now. He's very shrewd that way. No one knows how much he's worth, but I know he's not losing money. The players are his hobby, not his livelihood."

Sarah relaxed. She had been concerned that Mr. Crisp was running what amounted to a brothel and hadn't been sure how to reconcile it. Her conscience sighed with relief.

Maggie visited with her long enough for her to finish eating and then left her alone with a warning that she shouldn't feel obligated to feed a large orange cat named Marmalade if he should come to call.

All of the wonderful food made her feel tired, so she spent an hour soaking in her very own tub and crawled into her very own bed to sleep.

~***~

Sarah woke up shortly after sunrise and stretched in satisfaction. She couldn't ever remember sleeping so soundly. It was still early, so she made a quick trip to the nearest supermarket and bought enough basic foodstuffs to hold her over for a couple of days. Home again, she made a short pot of coffee and toasted a bagel.

She sat on her front porch to eat and started to fret about the job. Everything depended on her ability to handle it. In spite of Mr. Crisp's assurances, she expected outright carnage. All of the images she had in her head were extremely violent and she wouldn't be surprised to find blood spatters everywhere. By 8:40 she decided it was time to face her demons.

Maggie waved to her from a door she hadn't been through and she went to say hello only to find herself in the kitchen. Her new boss was at the table with a newspaper and smiled at her. "Good morning, Mr. Crisp."

"Morning. Are you ready to work?"

She nodded. "Definitely." She looked over at Maggie. "Thanks again for dinner last night. It was excellent."

"You're welcome, dear. Would you like some coffee?"

"I've already had some, thanks. How do I get upstairs from here?"

Mr. Crisp folded his paper. "I'll take you up. We need to get you some shirts as well." He leaned over to kiss Maggie's cheek before leaving. "Thanks for breakfast."

Their first stop was a small room that held supplies ranging from office products to cleaning solutions to sports drinks. He opened a cupboard and showed Sarah a variety of black shirts that all had STAFF printed in white on front and back.

"Take your pick. There are polo shirts, T-shirts, tank tops and French-cut T-shirts. Take five of whatever you feel comfortable with. If you ever rip one or it wears out, tell Pete and he'll set you up with a replacement."

Sarah went through them quickly, taking a variety of shirts in her size. "I haven't seen Pete or Maggie wearing these."

"They aren't a requirement really. They're more for your protection. In case there are ever players in the house, they identify you as mine-so to speak-and they know not to touch or harass you. I don't think Pete is in any danger for the obvious reasons and Maggie has been with me longer than most of the players. You, on the other hand . . ." his voice trailed off.

Sarah looked at him and saw that his head was cocked to one side and his eyebrows were drawn close together. "Me, what?"

He folded his arms. "Passions among the players run a little high in this house. Sometimes it affects judgment. Until I'm sure they all know that you're off limits, I'd appreciate it if you wore one of those in the house. Never assume there isn't a player somewhere in the house. Sometimes they come here just for a quiet place to visit."

"Okay." Sarah picked a French-cut T-shirt and laid it over a chair back. "Turn around and I'll put this on."

He turned around immediately. "By the way, call me Jordan. When people call me Mr. Crisp it makes me think my dad is nearby."

Sarah pulled her shirt off and dropped it in a chair. "Jordan, then." She pulled on a regular T-shirt and tucked it in. "I'm ready."

Jordan turned with a smile and indicated her shirts with a nod. "You can drop those off in the

kitchen and pick them up after you finish working."

Sarah ran to the kitchen and left the shirts by the back door, then ran back to Jordan and followed him upstairs. Emily turned out to be a rather plain woman in her late twenties with the most vivid green eyes she had ever seen.

Jordan introduced them. "Emily, this is Sarah. Your replacement."

Emily smiled and Sarah warmed to her. "Hi."

Jordan put a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "I'll leave you in Emily's capable hands. See you later, Em." He walked away and Sarah resisted the urge to watch him go.

"You ready?" Emily asked.

"I'm a little nervous," she admitted.

Emily took her by the hand. "Don't worry. I was nervous my first day, too. There's nothing to it." She opened the door and led her inside.

Sarah relaxed almost immediately. There was no blood. In fact, it looked almost exactly the same as when she'd been here before.

"How are you doing?" Emily asked.

"I had this terrible image in my head," she laughed. "I can handle this."

"Good." Emily squeezed her hand and let go. "First, last and most important is your safety. Come on. I'll show you what to do."

Boiled down to simple terms, all she did was basically dishwashing, polishing, dusting and vacuuming. The beds in the side rooms only needed a single sheet changed and there were towels to collect that had stuff on them Sarah wasn't ready to think about, but it all fit in one washer load. The hardest part of the job turned out to be handling the toys, but only because she was embarrassed by them.

At least she didn't have to collect them. There was a basket outside the cleaning room and all of the used toys were in it. Clamps and clips were in another basket and paddles and such were left on beds and tables. When Emily opened the dishwasher and started laying the dildos in it, Sarah laughed until she got the hiccups. It made sense, but the image was just so incongruous.

Emily showed her how to do everything so she understood the why as well as the how and it helped cement the job in her mind. "I think you'll do just fine," Emily told her when they were done a few hours later. "Monday is my last day, so if you have any questions we've got a couple of days to address them."

"Why are you quitting?" Sarah asked as she tossed her latex gloves in the trash.

Emily blushed delightfully. "I'm getting married."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks. I found a great guy and he's really good with my son. We're moving to Philadelphia in a couple of weeks so he can take over his dad's furniture outlet."

"That's great. I hope you'll be very happy."

Emily sighed. "I'm going to miss this place. I've been here almost a year and everyone is so nice. It's almost like a family if you let it be. Can I offer you a piece of advice?"

"Sure. I'll take all I can get."

"Don't let this get to you. Nothing that happens here has anything to do with who you are. And there's nothing to be ashamed of in doing this work. They're going to do it anyway. If you look at it right, there's nobility in cleaning up after them. You'll be protecting them from each other. You help keep them safe. Jordan keeps them in line-you keep them healthy. I've met some of them and they're good people. They work hard, pay their taxes and treat their children with love. Okay?"

Sarah nodded with greater understanding. "Thanks, Emily."

"No problem. Now," she reached into her pocket, "we picked up \$65 in tips." She grinned. "I worked harder teaching you so I'm keeping \$35. Starting tomorrow we'll split it evenly. Deal?"

Sarah thought this was more than fair and she pocketed her cash. "Do you make much in tips?"

"Oh, yeah. This is a sweet deal. Tips are under the table and it almost doubled my income. You're living here though. You'll make more in tips than you do in salary." She looked at her watch. "I've got to go. My son has a soccer game today and I was hoping to be able to go watch him play. See you tomorrow at the same time?"

Sarah thanked her again and headed for the kitchen. Maggie hustled her into a chair and put a plate of cookies in front of her. "How are you doing?" she asked with obvious concern.

"I'm fine," Sarah said. She looked up at the older woman curiously. "Is Jordan aware of how much Emily makes in tips?"

"I imagine so." Maggie poured a glass of milk and set it next to the cookies. "Not much escapes the Master's notice. Why?"

Sarah squirmed in her chair. "It's too much money for the job. Even without tips I'm making more than I need. Especially with all of my utilities taken care of. It makes me uncomfortable."

Maggie pulled out a chair and sat down. "Listen, honey. It's never a good idea to tell someone that they are paying you too much for doing a good job. The Master is paying you what he thinks a good job is worth. There aren't many employers out there who will think that way. Most pay what they can afford without sacrificing what they want for themselves."

"I suppose that's true."

"Have some cookies, dear."

~***~

Sarah had her new job down pat after the second day. She asked Emily a lot of "what if" questions about things she might encounter and felt she had a good handle on the nature of her employer's expectations. The rest of her time that weekend was spent settling in, tentatively exploring her new surroundings, and meeting a few of her co-workers.

Snooping around in the massive house was out of the question, so Sarah explored the grounds. Introducing herself to a groundskeeper named Leroy (a quiet nondescript, middle-aged man who called her ma'am), Sarah learned that the Crisp Estate encompassed 480 acres. A bit more than two-thirds of it was a virtual forest of alder and birch. Leroy showed her where to find the beginning of a trail that wound through it and warned her not to walk it after dark. According to the shy man, it was quite easy to become disoriented in the dark and become lost. He suggested that there might even be predators in it from time to time. Sarah wasn't sure whether or not to believe him, but a small measure of caution would not be a bad idea.

The rest of the property was very precisely manicured. While the forest drew her with its free-spirited wildness, the gardens and lawns around the house comforted her with their structured elegance. Everything was just perfect. It was unnatural in its precision, but it felt good to look at it all. Leroy told her that it took six full-time landscapers to maintain it. She could easily believe it.

A long, low building sat off to one side of the mansion behind some trees. Sarah cautiously wandered closer to see what it was and met Cirenio. A few years older than herself, Cirenio was a dapper Latino man with a pencil thin moustache and a ready smile. He was charming, but didn't put any moves on Sarah. She liked him immediately. When she told him she was snooping, he took her inside the brick building for a tour.

It was Jordan's garage and the cars were lined up like they were in a showroom. Sarah counted nine shiny vehicles. She didn't know a lot about cars, but the ornamentation on each grill made them easy to recognize: Jaguar, Porsche, Hummer, Cadillac, Aston Martin, BMW, Rolls Royce, Maserati and Bentley. They were beautiful. Cirenio seemed to take personal pride in them. As the mechanic/chauffeur, it was his job to maintain them. With an excited air, he led Sarah to a shop containing an older sports car in the process of being refurbished.

Sarah wasn't particularly interested in the process, but she listened avidly as he explained what

he was doing. Apparently, he had an arrangement with Jordan. There wasn't much to do in taking care of the other cars, so he rebuilt classic cars on the side. Jordan would buy old cars for him and pay for parts. When the cars were completed, Cirenio sold them and kept half of the money. He was proud of the fact that he had never lost money for Jordan and was planning to someday have his own shop and do nothing but restore old cars. Sarah was impressed with Cirenio's ambition and Jordan's willingness to help him achieve it. Not many employers would allow an employee to use company time and resources to pursue their own interests-even if there was profit to be made from it.

Marmalade introduced himself when she got home from her walking. Big and buff, the orange cat was sitting on her front porch with a large, dead rat at his feet. Sarah made a fuss over him and tried not to gag as she swept the rodent into a dust pan. Marmalade wound himself through her ankles as she walked his present out to the trash can. Securing the lid, she looked down at the purring cat seriously.

"I hope you don't plan on bringing me such things on a regular basis," she scolded. "Not that I don't appreciate the time and energy you put into it, but you don't have to impress me. I can see how strong and handsome you are." Leaning down, she scratched at the top of his head. "You can come visit me whenever you want, but no more presents, okay?"

"I see you met my cat."

Sarah straightened to see Maggie at the back of the house next door. "He brought me a gift."

"Did he now?" Maggie laughed. "Dead or alive?"

"Dead." Sarah grimaced. "Is he likely to bring me live ones?"

"He might."

She shuddered. "If he does, I'm calling you to come and handle it."

"Fair enough. I just made sun tea. Can I interest you in a glass?"

Sarah's first impulse was to decline, but she over rode it. "Sure. That would be nice."

Maggie's house was almost identical to her own in structure, but it was quite charming and homey inside. It had the organized clutter one usually associated with grandmothers and Sarah thought it was like being inside of an emotional treasure chest. She just knew that every single thing had a story or emotion attached to it.

"Make yourself at home, dear. Do you want sugar?"

"No, thanks." Sarah smiled at a picture of Maggie on the deck of a boat with a festive drink in hand. "I like your house. Everything is so pretty."

"Why, thank you, dear."

Running her fingers briefly over a yarn doll, Sarah took a seat on the sofa and let Marmalade curl up on her lap. "How many people work here?"

"On the Estate?" Maggie held out a tall glass of ice tea. "Fourteen, I believe."

Sarah ticked off mental fingers. "You, Pete, Cirenio, six landscapers-that makes nine."

"You makes ten." Maggie adjusted a lumbar pillow at her back and settled. "Then there are the three maids and Joey."

"What does Joey do?"

"He works part time taking care of the solarium and the inside plants." Maggie smiled fondly. "He's the sweetest thing. Joey is . . . a little slow, but he's a genius with plants. He works in the afternoons on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays."

Sarah nodded. "I may not meet him then. I'll be in school on those days."

They spent a very pleasant hour talking about Sarah's schooling and the co-workers she had yet to meet. Maggie invited her to eat dinner up at the big house, but Sarah declined. She wanted to enjoy cooking for herself and it seemed to her that an invitation to dinner should come from Jordan. Sarah went home feeling like she had won the lottery.

~***~

About two weeks after school started, the stereo in the playroom gave her an idea and she started recording her lectures. She played them back while she worked and it not only helped her comprehension of the material, it distracted her from thinking about what had gone on in the room the previous night. She rarely thought about the players after the first few days.

She seemed to run into Jordan almost every day, either in the house or on the grounds. He claimed to be pleased with her work, but continued to express concern over her welfare. Even Maggie and Pete seemed to be watching her carefully and she began to feel a little impatient.

The first week of October, summer made a last ditch effort to stay around and it warmed up for several days. On a Sunday afternoon after working, Sarah took a cheap novel and headed for the gazebo out in front of the house. With all of the bushes and ivy it was quite cool and she was delighted to find a small gurgling fountain set in the center. Stretching out on a wooden bench with her sweater under her head, she opened the book and started reading. She desperately needed some time away from school and she was completely engrossed when Jordan's voice startled her.

"May I join you?"

Sarah jumped up in surprise and looked over her shoulder. "Sure."

Jordan held out a tall glass of icy lemonade. "I thought you could use this."

"Thanks." She sipped it and realized how thirsty she was. She drank about a third of it and sighed. "That hits the spot."

Jordan sat down opposite her and pulled a small flower through the lattice to smell it. Sarah was struck by the femininity of the act and wished that she could talk about her suspicions. "It's all right for me to be out here, isn't it?"

"Of course." Jordan stretched his long legs out and smiled at her. "I saw you come out here from my office window a couple of hours ago. I thought you might be taking a nap, but instead I find you reading . . ." He cocked his head to read the title. "A romance novel?"

Sarah blushed. "I needed to escape for a while. Pirates and a kidnaped princess seemed like a good idea."

"Your secret is safe with me," Jordan chuckled. "Is that a good book?"

"Better than most, I guess. All of these are pretty predictable, but this writer doesn't let you take much for granted. And her imagery is quite good. I know it's trash, but it's fun trash." Sarah grinned. "Do you want to read it when I'm done?"

Jordan laced his fingers behind his head and relaxed. "It's not necessary." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It's nice out here. I don't get out of the house often enough."

"Winter is coming," Sarah pointed out unnecessarily. "There won't be too many more days like this."

"When it gets here," Jordan said in an easy tone, "there's a fireplace in the den. You're welcome to come in and curl up with a book any time. There's something very comforting about the crackling of a fire when there's snow on the ground."

"I'd like that."

With Jordan's eyes closed, Sarah grabbed the opportunity to study him. Male or female, his skin was flawless. She felt reasonably sure that a razor had never been used on his face and he didn't have an Adam's Apple. He also didn't appear to have breasts. She would have liked to put her hands inside his shirt to make sure, but she knew it was impossible. Her eyes dropped to his groin. It was hard to tell if there was a bulge or if it was just the way his slacks fit. From working with the toys upstairs, however, she knew it would be easy enough to fake having a man's genitals. Her gaze traveled back up to his mouth and she wondered if he was a good kisser. His mouth was perfect. She imagined his lips would be soft and sweet and she let herself fantasize about it.

Sarah looked away, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction her thoughts were taking her. Regardless of his true gender, Jordan was her boss and it was completely inappropriate for her to think about him as a potentially desirable woman. She wasn't choosy about size, race, shape or dress when she went hunting for a sexual partner, but sizing up her employer was out of line. Even if he had given any indication of interest, it was unethical in the extreme.

She wondered if it was time to go out to a bar and find a date. For some reason, the idea didn't provoke any response and she filed it away, intending to keep an eye on it and see if anything changed.

"You seem to be handling the job very well," Jordan said abruptly.

Sarah rolled her eyes and dropped her head back.

"What did I say?" Jordan asked.

She looked over at him and noticed how blue his eyes were. "I feel like everyone is waiting for me to have a nervous breakdown. '*Keep an eye on Sarah. She could blow at any minute.*' Is it so hard to believe that I'm really okay with it?"

Jordan raised an eyebrow. "Are you?"

"I haven't lost weight." She held up a hand and ticked off each point. "I'm sleeping better than ever. I'm doing *very* well in school. I'm not afraid of you or the room. I'm *fine*, but I feel all this pressure on me to feel something I just don't feel and it's frustrating. Everybody *looks* at me when I walk through the house like something terrible has happened to me and I just don't realize it yet. I don't think I'm being unreasonable when I say that I'm getting a little tired of it."

Humor filled Jordan's eyes. "Fair enough. I'll trust you then to tell me if any problems come up and I'll quit nagging you about it."

"Thank you." Sarah had to smile now that it was over. "Maybe you can do something about Maggie and Pete, too."

"Pete, yes, but Maggie is a law unto herself. Maybe you could cry on her shoulder or something and she'll feel like you've finally gotten through it."

Sarah laughed. "She's always waiting for me with cookies, like a little sugar is going to make everything all better. I went out through the side door once to avoid her and she followed me home."

"Do you want me to say something to her?"

"No. I like Maggie. It's kind of nice to have someone caring for me so aggressively. I'll get used to it."

Jordan dropped his hands to his sides and looked confused. "Cookies are aggressive?"

Sarah opened her mouth to explain her childhood and suddenly thought better of it. She doubted Jordan would understand and he would probably feel like she was deprived and feel sorry for her. Sarah closed her mouth with a snap.

He put his hands up. "Sorry. None of my business." He stood up and put his hands in his pockets. "I've got to get back to work. I'll let you get back to your book."

Sarah turned to watch him walk away. She felt like she had just been rude though she didn't know exactly how. "Jordan?"

He turned instantly and shielded his eyes from the descending sun.

"Thanks for the lemonade."

"My pleasure, Sarah."

His smile seemed completely genuine and she couldn't help but smile back. She lay back and closed her eyes, listening to the fountain and the chirping of birds. Her desire to read seemed to be gone and she allowed herself the luxury of doing absolutely nothing at all.

~***~

"What are you going to wear to the party?" Pete asked her after work about a week later. "What party?"

"The Halloween party."

Sarah shook her head slowly. "No one told me about a Halloween party."

Pete smacked himself on the head with a meaty hand. "My fault. We have it every year and I forgot you wouldn't know. It's the night before Halloween at eight. You are welcome to bring family or friends. Everybody else will."

I don't have any friends. She hesitated as her inner voice made this announcement and she realized it was true. She shook her head more to clear it than anything else. "I have to study."

Pete looked disappointed. "It's only for a couple of hours."

Sarah felt embarrassed and tears were threatening to make an appearance. She just wanted to get away. "I'll think about it."

She went home in a daze and tried to think of even one person she had ever confided in, one person she could ask to the movies or to a Halloween party. She came up blank. In that moment she realized how truly alone she was. She was friendly with a great many people because it was

expected of her, but she had no one she could identify as her friend. Sarah curled up on her couch with a pillow and called her entire life into question.

She had always felt that she lived on the outside of society. Everyone else seemed to be gathered around the warm fires of family and friends and Sarah watched them from the cool shadows. She had assumed that it was her sexuality that set her apart, but now she wasn't so sure. Even with other lesbians she felt left out. Though, if she was honest, that wasn't a fair statement. She recognized now that many people had tried to get close to her over the course of her life. People approached her just to talk all the time. They inquired about her health, her opinions, and her plans, or just tried to make her laugh. Through it all, she was friendly but remote. She held people off and pushed them away until they gave up and she hadn't even been conscious of it.

Sarah's life over the past seven years had been devoted to finding a way up and out of her parents' apathy. She came to the realization that all she had done was pretty life up a bit for herself. Sure, she was getting a great education and she would be able to provide for herself in a much more comfortable fashion than her parents had, but in the end, she had adopted her parents' emotional poverty as her own. She had wanted to be nothing like her parents and it turned out that she was *exactly* like them.

It had been understandable when she was a child because it was all she knew, but now she was an adult and responsible for her behavior. She had used her schooling to isolate herself. Even moving out of the dorm could be seen as an effort to drive people away. She finally understood that without affection and love in her life, she would be no different from that which she had focused on escaping. Her hard work would mean nothing if she didn't find a way to educate her heart as well.

She looked over her sexual history with shame. She had been insensitive and cruel to the girls she had bedded in high school. They'd all had to overcome their fear of rejection to seduce her and she had walked away from them at the first sign of emotional intimacy. That she had given far more orgasms than she had received probably only made her rejection of them even more painful. At the time she felt that she had given enough. Now she thought she had probably done more harm than good.

What truly shamed her though, was how she had dealt with her needs since coming to college. It would not be far off the mark to say that she walked into a bar or coffee house and asked the patrons if anyone wanted to fuck her. She usually went with the first one to show a serious interest. She could not recall a single moment of intimacy with any of them. Most of them would reach for her as she began dressing, but all let her go when she thanked them for their time. Sarah wasn't sure that she had ever seen any of them as people. That's what made her feel ashamed now.

Her certainty that she would find someone to love when it was more convenient faded away and Sarah felt tears pricking at her eyes. After school there would be work and then she would be starting her own business and making it flourish. There would never be a good time and even if she did find someone, she didn't know the first thing about being close to people. A lifetime of this new loneliness stretched out before her and she started to cry.

Sarah wasn't good at crying. Her nose plugged up and her stomach ached. It made her feel angry and depressed all at once. On the one hand, she felt sorry for herself, but on the other she was angry that she was crying over something she had done to herself.

By the time she settled into sniffles, she was in a full-blown funk. She dragged herself into the shower in hopes that it would revive her, but it didn't. She pulled on a pair of sweats and slippers and went into the kitchen to eat lunch because it was her routine. Food just didn't interest her, but coffee sounded okay so she started a full pot.

Sarah sat at the table with her head on her folded arms while it brewed and groaned at the knock on her door. It was probably Maggie with her infernal cookies, but she really didn't want company right now. She couldn't just leave her out on the porch though. She glanced in a mirror on the way to the door and thought she looked okay.

It was Jordan. "Pete has informed me that he forgot to tell you about the Halloween Party. I just came by to apologize and to..." his voice trailed off and he looked at her closely. "Are you all right?"

Sarah couldn't take it. "Yes. Thanks for coming by." She didn't exactly slam the door, but it was a near thing. She winced as soon as it closed. Here she was crying over not having any friends and she had just slammed the door in her boss's face. She put her forehead against the door with a sigh and her funk deepened.

"Hi, it's me," she heard Jordan say outside. "I think we hurt her feelings. It looks like she's been crying." There was a brief pause and Sarah went up on her tiptoes to look through the peephole. Jordan had his back to her and a cell phone to his ear. "I don't know. She doesn't want to talk to me. Maybe she'll talk to Maggie. I think I make her nervous."

Sarah felt like dirt. "No, you don't," she blurted out. She saw Jordan's head turn toward her a little and then he leaned back against her door.

"I think I'll wait for a bit and see if she changes her mind about talking to me." Jordan dropped his chin to his shoulder and Sarah knew that he was hoping she would continue to talk to him through the door. "She might feel like we deliberately left her out of the loop."

Sarah settled onto her feet and pressed her hands and cheek into the cool wood. "That's not it."

"I know you didn't, Pete. Mistakes happen. I didn't think of it either. Maybe she's upset for some other reason. Maybe she's a Jehovah's Witness."

Sarah sighed. "That's not it either."

"Maybe she's just too chicken to dress up and party."

Sarah snickered involuntarily. She still had tears in her eyes, but there was something sweet and

dear about what was happening.

"I hadn't thought of that. She probably thinks some horrible sadistic bash is going to take place. Did you tell her there would be kids?"

Sarah folded her hands over her heart to contain the ache she felt. Jordan was quiet for over a minute.

"Well, then, I just don't know what it could be. Maybe she really does have to study. You know how hard she works."

Sarah spoke before her throat could close up. "I don't have any friends."

"I'll get back to you, Pete." There was a brief moment of silence. "Of course you have friends, Sarah."

"No, I don't," she sniffed. "I don't have any friends. I never have." Tears ran down her face, but she felt too bereft to cry. "I've used studying to push everyone away and I don't have anyone to invite to the party."

"Maggie and I are going stag, too," Jordan said softly. "Maybe we could go together. We've been trying to be your friends right from the start. All you have to do is let us."

Sarah wiped at her face in an effort to get control of herself. She knew friendship couldn't be that easy.

"Can I at least come in and we'll talk about it?"

She almost said no, but if she wanted to change her life, there was someone on her front porch asking to be let in. She swiped at her nose with her sleeve. "Do you promise not to say I'm having a reaction to my job? Or that I'm imagining things?"

"Yes, of course."

Wiping tears away with the other sleeve, she opened the door. She couldn't look any higher than Jordan's knees. "Sorry I slammed the door in your face."

"I'm over it," Jordan said generously.

"Do you want some coffee?"

"Sure."

Sarah padded into the kitchen and pulled two mugs from the cupboard. Filling them both, she set them on the table. "Do you want milk or sugar?"

"I drink it black," Jordan said as he sat down. "My dad always said cream and sugar were for sissies."

Sarah sat down with one foot on the seat so she could hug her knee. "My folks said it was a waste of money and would make me fat."

"Have you ever watched Maggie doctor her coffee?"

Sarah smiled inadvertently. "I'm not sure why she bothers to put coffee in it at all. It's no skin off my nose if she wants to drink a cup of cream and sugar."

Jordan chuckled. "But she drinks tea straight. Go figure."

Sarah rubbed her face on her knee to scrub away any lingering traces of tears.

"Now, Pete doesn't drink coffee at all," Jordan added. "He claims it hurts his stomach, but he drinks a six-pack of Mountain Dew every day. It's a wonder he even has a stomach."

Sarah rested her chin on her knee and stole a glance at Jordan. He was completely relaxed and watching her patiently. "Sorry I'm such a mess."

"You're not a mess, Sarah. Some people get all blotchy when they cry. Their eyes swell up and their noses turn red and drip all over everything. It's very unattractive." His face was screwed up in distaste. "Trust me. I've seen every kind of tear there is. You still look relatively normal."

Sarah sniffed. "Thanks, Jordan," she said with amused sarcasm. "That means a lot to me."

"No one's ever said I didn't know how to compliment a woman," he said proudly. His attitude made her laugh and she started to relax in spite of herself. "That's better," he added. "Now, I seem to remember reading that you were Captain of the Chess Club in high school."

"I was," she admitted. "Do you play?"

"Now and then. Do you have a set?"

Sarah nodded and sipped at her coffee. "Why?"

"I'd like to see if you're any good."

Sarah raised her eyebrows in disbelief. "You want to play chess with me?"

"If you think you're good enough to take me on, yes."

Sarah went to get her set from the bedroom. As chess sets go it wasn't very remarkable, but it had been a graduation gift from her guidance counselor in high school and held some sentimental value for her. She set it down on the table as Jordan moved their cups. "I haven't played in

several years," she warned.

"I'll take it easy on you," he promised. "Do you mind if I take black?"

"You don't want to flip for white?"

"Black fits my reputation better," he said casually.

Sarah squinted at him. "You do know that white goes first, right?"

Jordan snorted. "*Please*. I wasn't born yesterday. I have played before. I just like to be black."

Sarah set her pieces up by rote and moved the Queen's Knight out. She sat back with her coffee and waited while Jordan finished setting up his pieces. He moved his Queen's pawn out a single space and leaned on his elbows. "What did you mean when you said you don't have friends?"

It was easier to talk while concentrating on chess. She didn't feel like she was going to burst into tears. It was almost like she was talking about someone else. "Pete told me I could bring a friend and I realized I don't have any, that's all. If I wanted to go out to a movie, there's no one I would feel comfortable asking to go with me. I've never had someone I could just talk to. At first I thought it meant that no one liked me, but I don't think that's true. I was sitting here thinking about it and I understood that I'm the one who pushes them away."

Jordan scratched at his ear. "Why do you do that?"

It helped that Jordan seemed more interested in the board than in her. She sighed. "Maybe it's because of how I was raised."

He put his fingers on a bishop and considered for a long moment before moving it. "Tell me about your parents."

Sarah studied the board. She couldn't figure out what Jordan was planning yet. "My dad worked in a plastics factory. He worked on the press line or something. My mom was a part-time waitress."

"Was?" He glanced up at her. "Are they dead?"

Sarah shrugged indifferently and moved a pawn. "I don't know. I haven't heard from them since I started at the University."

"Why not?"

"Because they don't love me." It didn't even hurt to say that. She had accepted that fact when she was ten years old.

"I find that hard to believe," Jordan frowned. "They must be terribly proud of everything you've

accomplished."

Sarah stared at Jordan over her coffee cup and tried to decide on the quickest way to convince him of the truth. "Do you want to know what the last thing was that my mother said to me? *'You're not coming back, right?' My dad said, 'I get her room'.*"

Jordan's face was pale and hard. "Are you serious?"

"It's not worth getting upset about," Sarah said truthfully. "It's just how things were. It's your move." She waited for his eyes to move back to the board before she went on. "When I was ten, my mother spent a week at the end of the summer teaching me to cook and do my own laundry. My dad told me to stay out of trouble, to be home by ten every night, not get pregnant and keep my grades up. They promised me that if I didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother me. I've been on my own since then. It wasn't so bad really." She saw Jordan flinch. "My primary image of my parents is of them sitting on the couch with the television blaring. I think it was more real to them than I ever was."

Jordan leaned back from the board with both hands in his hair as if his head hurt. "Were they abusive?"

"No. I mean, they spanked me when I was too noisy or I broke something, but they never really hurt me." He relaxed with a sigh and leaned back over the board. "I cleaned up after myself and tried not to ask for anything and they let me do anything I wanted as long as I was quiet and didn't interfere with their plans. After I started making my own money, I hardly had to talk to them at all. I bought my own clothes and saved up for a car so they wouldn't have to drive me anywhere. Except for the noise of the TV it was almost like living alone."

"Where did you get your drive? Your motivation?"

Sarah took one of Jordan's bishops. "The first week of high school there was a guidance counselor who asked me what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I asked him what he meant and he asked if I would be content to have the same kind of life as my parents or if I wanted more. That's when I realized that I had a choice." She smiled at the memory of her epiphany. "He changed my life. I knew that if I wanted more I'd have to do it all myself, so I asked him what I would have to do. Mr. Daniels and I mapped out all four years of high school in an afternoon, including my job and my extracurricular activities. I followed it to the letter and here I am. The only thing I didn't allow for was a social life. I didn't know I was missing out on anything, but I think if I don't figure it out, I'll be just like my folks."

Jordan moved a pawn. "You really don't have friends at school?"

Sarah shook her head. She was pretty sure she was going to win the game, but she couldn't figure out what Jordan was doing. Whatever his strategy was, she couldn't see it and it worried her.

"What about lovers?" he asked. "Surely you've had girlfriends."

Sarah blushed. "Yes and no."

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he said quietly.

"It's just embarrassing," she admitted.

"You know what I do," Jordan said seriously. "Nothing you could tell me would make me think less of you. You must know that."

She brushed her hair behind one ear. "I've had sexual partners, but never a girlfriend. Whenever I need sex...I go to a bar and pick someone who looks as desperate as I feel and we...you know."

Jordan grinned. "You make it sound so easy. Most women want intimacy first. How do you get by that?"

She hugged her knee tighter, ashamed of herself. "I look for someone who looks...hungry. Someone who doesn't look at faces. I just go up to them and ask them if they want to have sex with me. Usually they do."

"That part doesn't surprise me," Jordan said as he moved his queen. "Aren't you worried about diseases or getting hurt?"

"I practice safe sex," she said. "I've been pretty lucky so far. I can tell if they're going to be trustworthy before we get to the motel room. If they make me nervous, I ditch them and try somewhere else."

"You should have someone looking out for you," Jordan said firmly. "It's dangerous out there."

Sarah dismissed his words with a flip of her hand and moved her own queen. "I'm careful. Don't worry about me."

Jordan was silent for a moment as he studied the board. "What about love?"

"I don't know anything about that. I think that's why I don't have friends. I don't know how to be close to..." Sarah frowned. "Why did you do that?"

He looked up in surprise at her tone. "Do what?"

"Your knight." She reached out and put her finger on the piece he had just moved. "Why did you move this here?"

"Because you were going to use your rook to take my queen."

"Probably," she admitted, "but I'm not after your queen. I'm after your king. By moving your knight you lost the game."

"Don't count on it," he said with bravado.

"I guarantee it," Sarah insisted.

Jordan frowned. "How?"

Sarah used both hands to show him. "I move my rook here to check you. You *have* to move your king here and my bishop slides over here to checkmate you. By moving the knight out of play you made it easier for me. You saved me having to take it out. You've shortened the game by four moves."

Jordan scratched his head. "But, you would have taken my queen."

Sarah grinned. "You don't know how to play, do you?"

"Yes, I do," he objected. "I moved all the pieces correctly, didn't I?"

She started to laugh. "I thought you had some brilliant strategy in the works and I was looking forward to seeing it. But you didn't. All this time I was trying to protect myself from a surprise attack."

Jordan squirmed in his chair. "I did my best."

"I hate to tell you this, Jordan, but . . . you *suck* at chess."

He knocked over his king. "You played in *high school*, for crying out loud. I didn't think you'd be a chess master."

"I'm from a small town," she teased. "I didn't have to be that good to excel."

He grimaced. "You're saying I'm really bad."

"You are." She laughed again as Jordan tried to playfully kick her and pulled her other foot up on the chair.

Jordan smiled at her. "You do have friends, you know. You might not know what to do with us, but we'll teach you. You just have to trust us a little bit."

Sarah felt scared and excited all at once. "What do I do?"

"Just let us visit with you. We won't take too much time away from your studies. Promise me you'll come to the Halloween Party."

Sarah bit her lip. "I don't know what to wear."

"Ask Maggie for help. She'll love it."

She rested her chin on her knees. "Are you going to dress up, too?"

"Of course," he grinned.

"What are you going to be?"

Jordan twirled an imaginary moustache. "You'll see."

~***~

Sarah frowned at her reflection. "I don't know about this, Maggie. It seems awfully risqué for children."

"Don't be silly," Maggie said. "They'll think you're that princess in *Aladdin*. What was her name?"

"I don't know." Sarah wrinkled her nose at the odd feeling between her eyebrows where Maggie had pasted a red dot. "But I think she had black hair. I look like 'I Dream of Jeannie'."

"Stop doing that with your face, honey. Do you want it to freeze that way?"

Sarah put her hands over her exposed belly. "I'm practically naked."

"You look lovely, dear." Maggie was dressed as a clown and made Sarah smile every time she looked at her. "One last thing and you'll be just about ready."

Sarah thought she *was* ready and she jumped as Maggie put a sticky finger in her navel. "What are you doing?"

"Harem girls have jewels in their belly buttons." She picked up a round blue jewel and carefully pushed it into place.

Sarah gasped as the sensation shot straight through to her clitoris. "No, no, no!"

"Yes, yes, yes," Maggie replied. "I know it's weird. You'll get used to it and you won't notice it. Trust me. The costume won't be complete without it."

"But it feels so . . ." *erotic*. She just couldn't say it to Maggie's face.

"Hold it there for a minute."

Sarah put her fingers on it and thought she might die of embarrassment. Maggie turned away and she experimentally pushed on it to make the feeling more intense. She pretended nothing was happening when Maggie turned back around and used tiny safety pins to hide her bra straps inside the skimpy top.

"I still say it's a mistake to wear a bra with this."

"There are going to be children, Maggie."

Maggie squinted into her face. "If there weren't, would you go without it then?"

"No," she said in horror.

"Then stop throwing them in my face. If I had your body, I'd walk around naked all the time."

Sarah snorted in disbelief. "I sincerely doubt that."

Maggie stepped back and pointed a finger at her sternly. "Don't think you know everything about me just because I'm old, Little Miss Smarty-pants."

Sarah blushed. "Sorry."

Maggie went back to work. "You know that picture that hangs in the main hall?"

"I love that picture," Sarah admitted. "I can't walk by it without staring."

Maggie smiled happily. "Thank you, dear."

Sarah stared at her in dawning comprehension. "That's you?"

"Don't look so shocked, dear. It's unbecoming."

"Sorry. Doesn't it bother you that everyone can see it?"

"Hell, no!" Maggie laughed. "I'd paste it up on a billboard if I could get away with it. I was gorgeous. Turn around."

Sarah obeyed. "I could never do that."

"That's too bad." Maggie worked at the back of her top. "You should be proud of the pleasure you give to others' eyes. People like looking at you. This thick blond hair, your perfect figure, your blue eyes-you're very beautiful. Okay! I think we're ready." She moved Sarah's hand and poked at the jewel.

"Don't do that," Sarah whispered.

Maggie cackled. "Gets you right where it counts, doesn't it?"

Sarah's ears were only moments from bursting into flame. "Yes!"

"It's a real sapphire, you know. I asked the Master for it."

"You didn't!" Sarah was mortified.

"Relax, dear." She shook out a cloak and threw it around Sarah's shoulders. "He doesn't know what I wanted it for."

She wondered all the way to the big house if Jordan would know how it made her feel and what she would do if he poked at it, too. The very idea made her weak in the knees and she found herself almost hoping he would.

He had taken to coming to her house on Tuesdays for a game of chess and Sarah had begun looking forward to it. He always took four of her chess pieces before the game started 'just to make it fair', but she beat him anyway. She had wondered if he was letting her win just to make her feel good, but his playing was too abysmal to believe that for long. She didn't understand why he kept playing if he kept losing, but she liked talking to him.

He talked just enough about himself that Sarah didn't feel like she was monopolizing the conversation, but she still didn't know that much about him. He had liked his parents, she knew. She could tell by his eyes that he still missed them. They had died of cancer within two years of each other about ten years earlier. He had no siblings, but he did have some cousins that weren't really a part of his life.

Mostly he talked about past and present employees as if they were his real family. She wondered if he would talk about her someday with other people and what he would say.

There were about forty people in the house, about a third of them children. A safety gate had been put up on the stairway that led to the play room and a banner with ghosts and pumpkins had been draped over Maggie's picture. Easy listening music was playing somewhere in the background and everyone was laughing and talking. Sarah had to smile at the variety and ingenuity of the costumes.

Maggie took her cloak before she could stop her and Sarah covered her belly protectively. "It's too late to hide," Maggie whispered. "You can spend the evening cringing or you can drink some wine and enjoy it. How do you want to remember this when you're old and can't get away with it anymore?"

Sarah elected to relax. She didn't know most of the other employees very well, but everyone was very friendly and they included her in their conversation as a matter of course. She met wives and husbands, and their scampering children were pointed out to her.

Pete stepped out of one of the sitting rooms with a stunning woman on his arm. She was almost as tall as he and easily as dark. Sarah thought she looked like an African Earth Goddess, especially since both of them were wearing what she assumed was traditional African garb. They were phenomenal and she was drawn to them like dirt to white slacks.

"You two look fabulous!"

Pete bowed to her with a smile. "Thank you. You look yummy."

Sarah giggled at his choice of words.

"This is my fiancée," he rumbled. "Amanda, this is Sarah. I told you about her."

"I remember," Amanda said peacefully. Her voice was like musk trapped between the sheets and Sarah's collarbones seemed to evaporate. "I believe Peter said you didn't have the sense to be scared of big, black men."

Sarah smiled. "His eyes are too beautiful for him to be scary."

Amanda looked pleased and she held her hand out. "Should I worry that you'll try to steal him away from me?"

Sarah put her hand in Amanda's and tried not to squeak. "No. But *you* might be in trouble." Amanda laughed with her whole body and Sarah felt like she had done a good thing. She grinned. "I hope you two will have babies. They'll be *magnificent*."

"All in good time," Pete chuckled. "All in good time."

A thin, silver stripe appeared over Pete's massive chest and he stepped back. Sarah followed it with her eyes to a black gloved fist and realized she was looking at a sword.

"What have we here?"

All of her awe at Amanda slithered into the cradle of her hips and her mouth went dry. Jordan was dressed entirely in black. He lowered the foil point to the floor and struck a pose. Sarah let her eyes drink him in. She was helpless to do otherwise. He wore knee-high black boots and tight black leather pants. A long sleeved black satin shirt was tucked in at the waist and a cape all but swirled at his back. He had a dark moustache and goatee that did nothing to hide his full mouth and a mask that covered the upper portion of his face. A wide brimmed hat topped it off. His mouth held a crooked grin and Sarah wanted to melt at his feet.

"Zorro," she croaked.

He laughed. "How do I look?"

"Pretty damn good," she said before she had a chance to think better of it.

Jordan took her hand and pressed his lips softly to the back of it. "You look exquisite."

Sarah felt her entire body blush.

His eyes found the sapphire and it was almost like he touched it. "I wondered what that was for."

Sarah looked into his face shyly. "It feels weird."

"I know." His eyes said that he really did.

A small tow-headed boy dressed as a vampire slapped Jordan on the leg and took off squealing. "Come back, you scoundrel!" Jordan yelled. "Face me like a man!" He winked at her and smiled at Pete and Amanda as he excused himself to run after the boy, sword in hand.

Amanda's look was penetrating and Sarah went in search of something to drink before the dark woman could see things better left private. The wine was very good and she drank several glasses before she realized she should probably be careful. The boundaries of her flesh seemed to be dissolving and everything was funny. Cirenio and his wife, Connie, were telling a cute story about their son when Jordan joined them.

He waited until they were done and spoke with them briefly before taking Sarah's arm. "Would you like to dance?"

Sarah had watched him dancing with other women over the last hour and a half and knew she would never be so graceful as he was. She tried to sober up. "I don't know how to dance like that."

"Yes, you do," he said confidently. "You just don't know it yet." He took off his gloves and tucked them in his pocket. He hadn't taken them off all night and Sarah was lost in wondering why he had taken them off now when he stepped into her and his warm hand settled low on her back. Her lungs emptied themselves as he pressed into her and she looked up into his face. "I know how to dance," he said softly, his perfect mouth only inches from Sarah's thanks to the high heels she wore. "You don't have to *do* anything. Just *feel*. I will tell your body what to do and it will be beautiful."

Sarah couldn't feel her legs as he lifted her arm to his shoulder and held the other gently out to the side. Her heart thumped painfully and she yielded to him. Everything beyond his face became a blur of movement and she let it all fade away.

"I love your costume," he said quietly. "Are you having a good time?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I'm a little drunk, I think."

"You're doing fine," he crooned.

"I've never been drunk before," she admitted. His breath smelled like warm cinnamon and Sarah breathed it in.

His hand on her back held her more tightly and his breath tickled her ear. "You're safe, little one. Everything is all right now. Just relax and let me dance with you."

Sarah rested her temple against his cheek and closed her eyes. She felt like she was in a dream. Their bodies fit together in a way she had never encountered before and she felt at peace. It might have been frightening to her at any other time, but Jordan was her new friend and dancing with him was the most perfect thing she had ever experienced. She felt protected and cared for and beautiful all at once. He seemed to be inside of her skin with her and she found it both comforting and exciting.

Jordan came to a gradual halt and his hand rubbed the small of her back softly. "Thank you, Sarah. That was lovely."

She opened her eyes and he stepped back. "That was so easy," she said in wonder.

He smiled at her. "Thank you for trusting me."

Sarah took a deep breath as his hands left her. "You look good with that sword. Like you know how to use it."

"I do," he nodded. "I studied fencing in college. I'm really not that good, but I know enough to make it look like I am." He pulled out his gloves and began to put them on. "I think it makes me look dashing. What do you think?"

Sarah wanted to tweak his moustache. "You're very handsome and you know it."

He gave her a courtly bow with one hand on the blade's hilt and a smile on his lips. "You are too kind, milady."

Someone came up to talk to Jordan and Sarah slipped away to find a bathroom. She felt a little dizzy and she decided not to drink anymore. She didn't have to work in the morning, but she would still have school and she wasn't interested in finding out if hangovers were as bad as their reputation.

She ate a little from the buffet table and smiled at the children who followed Jordan around like he was the Pied Piper. When she unexpectedly broke into a jaw-splitting yawn, she found her cloak and worked her way to the door. She looked over her shoulder as she slipped out and saw Jordan's eyes following her. She smiled at him and his answering grin warmed her all the way home.

~***~

Snow finally fell about a week before Thanksgiving. It started shortly after she had gone to bed, but she hadn't noticed until she got up to make herself some warm milk. She wrapped herself in a heavy blanket and took her milk out to the front porch. It was still and quiet, but there was a whispering hiss as the flakes settled to the ground. She sat in the darkness and opened herself up to the beauty of it.

Sarah had been inexplicably happy of late. She was afraid to question it for fear it would go away, but she couldn't just let it be either. She thought it might be that she felt like she had found a home. A place where she belonged. She'd only been working for Jordan for three months, but it was hard to imagine being anywhere else.

She knew her feelings were primarily because of Jordan. She finally had someone she could call her friend. It was a little odd at times because he was also her boss and her landlord, but his friendship was the most important thing. There were a great many things she wished she could ask him-the least of which was his gender. It just didn't seem as important as it used to. It didn't matter whether he was a man or a woman. He was Jordan and that was enough. She would have liked to ask her friend why he didn't have a girlfriend, but she could never ask her boss.

She also couldn't talk to him about the dreams. Sarah dreamed about dancing with Jordan almost every night. All they ever did was dance, but she would wake up with the feel of his hand in the small of her back, his breath warm on her neck, his body fitting into hers like he belonged there. A few nights earlier, she dressed to go out with every intention of finding someone to ease her sexual needs, but she gave up after the second bar. No one had looked at all interesting to her. The dream that night was particularly vivid and she woke with an aching heart. She knew that the people you dreamed about were really manifestations of your own psyche and that it wasn't really about Jordan, but sometimes it sure felt like it was.

Maggie's cat, Marmalade, squeezed through the posts of her porch railing and Sarah reached out to him with a smile. "What are you doing, big guy? How come you're not in snuggling with your mother?" He walked up her chest and rubbed his face on hers and Sarah scratched the top of his head. He was surprisingly dry except for his feet and when she held open her blanket, he crawled inside, kneaded her lap a few times and curled up to sleep.

Even such a simple thing as a cat sleeping on her lap was a new and wonderful thing for Sarah. She wondered if maybe she could get a cat of her own, but she didn't know the first thing about taking care of one and how much time they needed from their owners. She decided to think it over for a bit before asking Jordan if it was okay.

With her hand buried in Marmalade's fur, she sighed and went back to reminiscing. Her parents had been on her mind a lot recently. It seemed like the happier she got, the more they nagged at her. It had been almost three and a half years since she had seen or heard from them and she didn't even know if they were alive and healthy. She had to wonder if they were even still married. They had not been good parents, but they had been all she'd known.

She felt sorry for them. They led such dreary, invisible lives and she wondered if she would ever see them again or if they would just pretend that they had no connection at all. Neither of her parents was over forty yet. They had been just teenagers when she had been conceived and it occurred to her that both were young enough to start over. It was even conceivable that her mother could still have children.

"Wow," she said softly as that possibility registered with her. They could also have gotten divorced and remarried. That opened up the chance of half-siblings. If her parents started a new

family, either together or separately, it would be like Sarah had never existed. If she were not part of their new life, there would be no evidence that she had even been a part of their old one.

Would they be better parents the second time around? She shuddered to think of little siblings and what it would be like for them growing up as she had. She wished a happier life for them, but if they had one it would make Sarah feel somehow responsible for the loneliness of her own childhood. She hoped that whatever form of birth control her parents had used for the first eighteen years of her life was still in use. It was hard to imagine that they ever had sex at all, but she knew they must. She prayed that if they had divorced and remarried that their new spouses had more life and compassion to share with children.

She couldn't decide if she wanted to know or not. What if they were dead? How would she feel about that? Would it please her if they had finally found happiness? What if they were still sitting on the couch together watching other people's lives on television? And what would she do if they were sick or injured and needed her help?

Her past was a gaping black hole inside of her that made her newfound happiness seem rather precarious. She wondered what she would have to do to heal it. The hushed tranquility of falling snow and Marmalade's purring in her lap gave her no answers.

~***~

When Jordan and Maggie learned that she had nowhere to go on Thanksgiving they had insisted that she spend it with them. Sarah had eaten until she felt drugged. It was only the three of them, but Maggie had cooked enough food for an army. There were five kinds of pie alone. Even just tasting everything once was enough to fill her up, but Maggie had kept pushing food on her. When none of them had been able to eat another bite, Jordan led the way to the den and stoked the fire. Maggie stretched out on the sofa and Sarah sat on the hearth with Jordan.

"What are you thankful for?" Jordan asked Maggie.

"Well, it's nice to still be alive, especially since I got rid of that bunion on my foot." She reached for an afghan that lay across the back of the couch and Sarah stood up to help her cover her legs. "Thank you, dear."

"How about you, Sarah?"

She went back to the fireplace and sat down. "I'm grateful that I'm not still in the dorm. I love my house and my job." She hunched her shoulders and stared at her feet. "And you guys are pretty great."

"Aren't you sweet?" Maggie crooned. "You're pretty great, too."

"I'm thankful no one got hurt this year," Jordan said. "And that Maggie and I have your company today. It's nice to spend the holiday with people you care about."

Sarah glanced at his face to find him smiling at her. What he had just said was probably the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. Her eyes filled with happy tears and she hoped that they didn't start running down her face and embarrass her.

Maggie spoke from the couch. "Did you ask her about Christmas, yet?"

"Not yet," Jordan admitted. "If you don't have any other plans, we want you to have Christmas with us. Usually it's just Maggie and I, but we talked about it and we hope you'll celebrate with us."

Sarah wiped away the tear that escaped. "What do I have to do?"

"Do?" Maggie asked. "The Master and I usually get each other a little something, but you don't have to *do* anything."

"Please don't tell me your folks didn't celebrate Christmas," Jordan pleaded. He looked genuinely distressed.

"We did," Sarah reassured him. "I always got a new winter coat or socks and underwear. Sometimes I even got books." She smiled in memory. "One year I got a pair of skates. I used to sleep with them because I was so happy to get them. They never bought me toys so it was a real treat." Maggie and Jordan were both staring at her without expression. "What?"

"No toys?" Maggie asked in a disbelieving voice.

Sarah hesitated uncertainly. "We didn't have a lot of money. I needed clothes more than toys."

"Did you have *any* toys?" Maggie asked.

Sarah was feeling embarrassed about her family and being grilled about it was making her feel worse. "Please, I don't want to talk about this anymore."

Maggie opened her mouth in protest, but Jordan stopped her. "Enough, Maggie. She said her word." Maggie sniffed and settled her head snugly on her pillow.

Sarah looked at him in confusion. "What word?"

"It just means that you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," he said without looking at her. "Don't feel obligated to spend a lot of money. And don't eat first. I always make breakfast."

"Okay. Do I have to work that morning?"

Jordan sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "We have to come up with a better system of letting you know what's going on. Everybody else works at about the same time so they talk to each other. You hardly ever see anyone so no one is telling you what everyone else knows."

Sarah leaned back against the warm bricks. "What did I miss?" Jordan leaned back as well and pulled one knee up. He rested an arm across it and let his hand dangle. She thought it was a terribly sexy pose and berated herself for noticing.

"The house is closed and everybody is on paid vacation from December 23 to January 3. Maggie and I will still be here and you're welcome in the house whenever you like, but we're it. Except for New Year's Eve," he added. "There's a party for the players and select members of the community that night. A regular kind of party. If you want to work, there's a bonus."

"What kind of work?"

"Probably walking around with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Pete's in charge of that and he's just now starting to work it out. If you want to work let him know. You'll have to wear a uniform and he needs time to order it."

"It won't be anything really outrageous will it?"

Jordan grinned. "Nothing like your Halloween costume."

Sarah grimaced. "That wasn't my fault. I didn't have any choice."

Jordan raised an eyebrow in feigned shock. "Are you telling me that one little old woman got the better of you?"

Sarah glanced at Maggie, but it looked like she was asleep. "She bosses you around all the time and you're *The Master*. I'm just the chambermaid."

Jordan slapped his knee and hooted.

"Sh," she warned. "You'll wake her up."

"Relax," Jordan said, still laughing. "Maggie can sleep through tornadoes. She won't hear a thing. Just wait till she starts snoring."

"That's a mean thing to say."

Jordan's eyebrows lifted. "I give it about five minutes. Prepare to be impressed."

They waited in silence, all eyes on Maggie, and in less than five minutes the first snore escaped. Sarah's smile grew wider as the snores grew louder and she finally couldn't help but laugh. She wondered why she had never heard this at home. Maggie didn't live that far away and it seemed that she should be able to hear her at night.

Jordan was laughing, too, and he grabbed her hand to pull her out of the room. "It's not safe to stay in the room very long. You could get hearing damage."

"I guess that's why Marmalade scratches on my bedroom window at night."

Jordan closed the library door. "What do you want to do?"

Sarah rubbed her belly. "I'm too full to do anything strenuous."

"Me, too, but I feel like if I don't do something I'll slip into a coma." He stretched until he creaked. "What do you usually do on Thanksgiving Day?"

"Study," Sarah answered honestly. "The dorms are pretty quiet on holidays so it's an excellent time to concentrate. Living alone has been great for my school work, you know. No one is playing loud music or crying over their boyfriends or trying to borrow my clothes. It's always quiet."

Jordan chuckled. "I lived in the dorms, too. I'm sorry to say that I was the rowdy type. I didn't do as well in my studies as you're doing in yours."

"You've done all right for yourself since then," she pointed out.

Jordan shrugged, but there was a hint of irony in his eyes. "It appears that way, doesn't it?"

It was tempting to question his tone, but Sarah didn't want to pry. "You know, I never did get a tour of your house. I want credit for not snooping around on my own."

This brought a smile back into Jordan's eyes. "I'd be happy to show you around. Come on."

Sarah had become accustomed to the sheer size of the house in its exterior dimensions, but her mind had not been capable of grasping how many rooms such a structure could contain. Jordan had rooms for everything. Library, den, study, a home theater that could seat twenty, a music room with a gorgeous grand piano, a fully equipped gym, a bar complete with pool table, formal and informal dining rooms and living rooms, even a ballroom big enough to host a high school dance. There were no less than four guest suites. Each one had a living room area and basic kitchen in addition to the required bedroom and bath.

Throughout, the decor was classy, yet gave the appearance of simplicity. Nothing was overdone, but then, nothing was underdone either. Sarah was impressed. "You have good taste," she remarked.

"Oh, I didn't decorate this," Jordan said. "I paid someone to do this. I have the decorating sense of a toad. All I did was pay the bills."

The last room Jordan took her to was Sarah's favorite. It had been obvious from the outside of the house that Jordan had a solarium, but the reality of it was breathtaking. Sarah entered a warm green jungle of trees, ferns and ivy with a gasp of awe. The room was huge and very little of the walls showed through the climbing plants. The tiled path wound through and under branches and

fronds to a waterfall that emptied into a pool large enough to support a small school of brightly colored fish.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

Jordan ducked under a branch and stepped around a large rock. "There's a couch back here if you want to take a break."

Sarah followed and fell into one corner of the old, overstuffed sofa. "This would be a great place to read."

Jordan sat down at the other end and stretched his long legs out. "It is. Feel free to come here whenever you like. Pete eats lunch in here almost every day and in the summer I sometimes sleep here. You can see the stars and the water sounds make it very peaceful and comforting." He chuckled. "We tried having frogs out here one year. They sounded great, but they kept escaping into the house. Maggie found one in the kitchen once and had such a fit we had to catch them all and set them free."

Sarah could see it in her mind and she laughed. "I wish I could have seen that."

"It took weeks."

He was so relaxed that Sarah felt safe in asking, "When you don't sleep here, where do you sleep? I didn't see anything that looked like your room."

Jordan hesitated. "I sleep downstairs."

Sarah visualized all that she had seen. "I didn't see any stairs."

"Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they aren't there."

She could tell that Jordan wasn't going to be more forthcoming. Sarah pretended to write a note on her hand. "Don't ask Jordan where he sleeps," she read aloud. "May I ask you a rather personal question?"

Jordan had half a grin on his face, but he thought it over before answering. "I reserve the right not to answer, but you are free to ask."

"Why don't you have a girlfriend? You're smart, rich, handsome and you have a good sense of humor. You could have any girl you want. It seems like some woman should have snatched you up already."

Jordan chuckled. "I don't snatch easily and I'm pretty choosy. There aren't that many women interested in me in any case."

"I find that hard to believe," Sarah snorted. "Most women are dying to meet someone like you."

Jordan sobered. "They don't see *me*. They see what they think I am and what I have. I'd rather be alone than with someone who doesn't really love me. How come *you* don't have a girlfriend?"

Sarah hugged herself protectively. "I've got to focus on school. I won't get a second chance with my education and a girlfriend would distract me."

"Sounds like an excuse to me," Jordan argued. "What's the real reason?"

Sarah's automatic defenses kicked in. "That is the real reason. Are you calling me a liar?"

"Yes. You gave me the justification that protects your real reason. Something else is behind your eyes and I want to know what it is."

"Why?"

Jordan turned a little and stretched his arm along the back of the couch. "I'll tell you what: answer my question honestly and I'll answer any question you have with equal honesty. What do you say?"

Sarah brushed her hair behind her ears and pulled her knees up. Jordan was asking her to bare her soul, but he was offering to do the same. She considered it for long moments. "You'll answer *any* question without getting mad?"

"You have my word," he nodded.

"Okay." Sarah had learned young how to distance herself from her feelings. She let go of any personal involvement in what she was going to say and took a calming breath. "I'm afraid that there's a reason my parents couldn't love me and that if I had a girlfriend, she wouldn't be able to love me either. I don't want to risk my heart only to learn that no one can love me."

"Oh God." Jordan slumped and his eyes were filled with compassion. "You are *not* unlovable, Sarah. Just because your parents were . . ."

"Do I get to ask my question now?" Sarah interrupted.

Jordan put a hand over his eyes for a second and murmured something inaudible. He took a deep breath and straightened. "Go ahead."

A million questions begged to be asked, but only one would do. "Why do you pretend to be a man?"

A collage of emotion drained the color from Jordan's face. "You think . . . I'm a woman?"

Sarah knew in that moment that she was right. She reconnected with her emotions in an instant and wondered if she had gone too far. "You said I could ask you anything. I answered your

question honestly."

Jordan lay back on the couch and covered her face with both hands. "*Jesus!* I didn't expect . . . How did you know? Did I make a mistake?"

Sarah relaxed. "I always knew. The first second I saw you I knew. How could anyone *not* know? It's so obvious."

Jordan abruptly scooted closer and looked into Sarah's eyes as if searching for something. "But how? How do you see a woman when everyone else sees a man?"

Sarah could feel Jordan's body heat and it made her heart beat faster. "You haven't answered my question. Why do you do it?"

Jordan struggled visibly with impatience. "It's complicated."

"Of course it is. Tell me anyway."

Jordan spoke with difficulty. "I look like a man no matter what I do. All my life I've been defending my gender. When I was four, a woman in a grocery store told my mom that she should cut my hair or people would think I was a girl. My mom said, 'He *is* a girl'. I know it was only a slip of the tongue, but it describes my entire life. I got tired of explaining myself. Letting people believe I'm a man is just easier and I don't have to deal with their anger and confusion. It also gives me more authority when dealing with the players. They're more likely to obey my rules. When people find out I'm a woman, they usually think I've had a sex change. It makes me feel like a freak. I love being a woman. There isn't even one tiny part of me that wants to *be* a man, but I'd rather be thought of as a man than as some sort of monstrosity."

The insight into Jordan's life was painful and Sarah put a hand to the ruggedly handsome face before she could think about it. "You're not a freak."

"You're not unlovable."

Sarah pulled her hand back, but the feel of Jordan's smooth cheek stayed with her. "You don't have a girlfriend because she'll find out the truth."

"Something like that." Jordan's color was returning, but she looked uncomfortable. "It's my turn again. How did you know?"

Sarah fought the urge to touch her again. "I honestly couldn't tell you. I just did. It was very confusing. Pete kept calling you sir and you looked so butch and handsome, but I knew you were a woman anyway. I had to train myself to think of you as a man, but I never believed it. I thought for a while that you might be transgendered, but it didn't feel right."

Jordan slowly stood up and put her hands on top of her head like she was trying to keep it from exploding. "I forget sometimes, you know?"

"Forget what?"

"What I am. *Who* I am. I'm surrounded by people all the time and it's like I'm invisible. My reality isn't real. I'm a construct in my own life. I tried to make myself easier to understand and only succeeded in making it impossible for anyone to know me."

"I know you."

Jordan bent over and started laughing. When she finally straightened there were tears on her face and she wiped them away with trembling fingers. "You can't know what a relief this is for me. After all this time, to be able to be myself with someone. To know that I'm not invisible? It's like being able to breathe again."

Having the truth out in the open hatched a new batch of questions. "Is it my turn to ask another question?"

Jordan chuckled. "Go ahead."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-four." Jordan dropped back onto the old sofa with a grin. "Go on. I know you're dying to ask me all kinds of things."

Sarah was no fool. She didn't need to hear the offer twice. "This isn't where you grew up, is it?"

"No. My childhood probably wasn't much different than yours. At least, financially. My dad drove a garbage truck and my mom sold Amway products. We did all right, but we weren't rich."

"You're rich now," Sarah pointed out. "How did you do it?"

Jordan stretched her legs out and crossed them at the ankles. "Investing, mostly. I had a small windfall in my senior year of college and a buddy of mine convinced me to invest in video game development and computer animation technologies. It was rather scary to risk it, but he turned out to be right. Over the years, he's done very well for himself handling my money."

It seemed rather crass to ask how much money Jordan had, so Sarah picked up on something else. "What kind of windfall?"

Jordan's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I want to answer that just yet."

Embarrassed, Sarah pulled back. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I'm just a little embarrassed by it. Ask me something else."

There was something else that Sarah really wanted to know, but she was a little nervous asking.

"Um . . . How do you hide your breasts?"

Jordan ran her hands over her flat chest. "I went to school with a guy who creates special effects for movies. He makes special vests for me. Would you like to see it?"

Sarah sat up straighter, surprised that Jordan was going to show her. "Yes."

Jordan's fingers made quick work of the buttons on her shirt and pulled it open. She stopped to undo her cuffs and pulled her shirt off completely. Arms wide, she turned to face Sarah.

It appeared to be a contoured beige T-shirt. Except for the color and texture it looked exactly like a man's chest and biceps. Sarah could see what looked like ribs and muscles. "How much of that is you?"

"None," Jordan answered. She put a hand over a pectoral muscle. "This is the thinnest part, but it's still thick enough that I rarely feel anything underneath it. All together it adds almost seven inches to my rib cage. I'm actually quite thin. My friend had to design something to make my chest look larger and my hips smaller. Knowing that I would be wearing these for a good long time, he made the chest thinner so it would hold my breasts instead of compressing them. He didn't want me to end up with empty bags when I got older." Jordan blushed. "I probably shouldn't have said that."

"May I touch it?"

"Sure."

It was uncanny how real it felt. It was soft on the surface, but it was firmer underneath without being stiff or hard. Feeling it through a shirt was like touching real skin. Under her fingertips it felt like nylon. "It must get hot."

"Hot I can handle. It's the itching that drives me mad. Sometimes I think I'll go crazy if it doesn't stop and it's usually when I can't take it off."

Sarah sat back. "Now that I know, I'd be happy to scratch your back any time you need it."

Jordan reached for her shirt. "Thanks for the offer. I may take you up on it."

Sarah felt closer to Jordan now than she ever had before. Her heart felt like it was swelling and needed release. "I like you," she blurted out.

Jordan looked up from buttoning her shirt with a wide smile. "I like you, too."

Elation made Sarah feel silly and reckless. "Will you teach me to dance?"

"Ballroom dancing?"

"I've never felt anything like it," she explained. "Ever since Halloween I've been having dreams about it almost every night. Do you think I could be good at it?"

There was a strange look in Jordan's eyes. "I think you'd be a natural. It would be an honor to teach you."

Sarah bounced in excitement. "When?"

~***~

It was snowing heavily when Sarah left her last final exam of the semester, but the sense of freedom she felt made it seem like spring. Fourteen days stretched out before her-days in which she hoped to spend as much time as possible with Jordan and Maggie. Christmas was only days away and she still didn't have her gifts, but now that classes were over, she could concentrate on shopping.

All of Sarah's spare time over the last weeks had been spent in Jordan's arms. She was steadily improving in her dancing lessons, but it was having Jordan's body pressing hotly into her that Sarah secretly craved. Just last night Maggie had said they looked beautiful together. It certainly felt that way to Sarah. Dancing with Jordan was far more intimate than sex had ever been with anyone else. She didn't feel whole unless she was within the circle of Jordan's arms. Maybe it was wrong to indulge in secret sensual pleasures with her employer, but Sarah couldn't give it up. It felt too good, physically and emotionally, for her to even consider pulling back. Not having any experience at dealing with intimacy left Sarah completely defenseless to it. As terrifying as it was, she was addicted heart and soul.

Part of what she had come to find so exciting about dancing was learning to let go. In order for Jordan to lead, Sarah had to surrender control to her. Her entire life had been about taking control in order to be safe. To voluntarily relinquish control into Jordan's keeping made the dance incredibly erotic. The more she surrendered, the better they were together.

Sarah's hands were half frozen by the time she scraped all the snow and ice from her car windows and headlights. The snow was falling thickly and she quickly jumped in the car to get the windshield wipers going before all her hard work was obliterated. The battered Toyota didn't have a heater-it had died several years before-and Sarah blew on her fingers to warm them up. Not having a heater meant that moisture collected on the inside of her windows when it was cold. She worked for several minutes with a small squeegee and an old rag to make it possible to see.

Conditions were bad on the road. The streets were slick and treacherous with all the new snow, but it was the poor visibility that made it particularly hazardous. Sarah drove slowly, avoiding the highway. Taking the streets through town would take longer, but it would be safer and help would be easier to come by if she got stuck.

Sarah was waiting her turn at a stoplight when all hell broke loose.

[Continued...](#)

[BadSquirrel's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Two

She hurt. That was the first thing she knew. Everything hurt. Even her hair. Sarah opened her eyes cautiously and even that was painful. She didn't recognize where she was. This was not her room. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried again. Individual elements came together and she realized she was in a hospital. There was a television high on the wall beyond the foot of her bed. Sarah could see an IV bag beside her and she could hear the steady beep of some sort of monitor.

Moving her head or her eyes was out of the question. She just knew that it would be agonizing. Sarah's mouth was cracked and dry, not to mention that it tasted like an old gym shoe. She tried to wet her lips with her tongue, but it didn't help and something was wrong with her tongue anyway. She whimpered at the pain of moving it.

"Sarah?"

Jordan's worried face was suddenly above her and Sarah's fears eased. "Hurt," she managed to say thickly.

"I'll bet you do," Jordan said with a relieved smile. "You're okay. I promise." She looked away for a moment and then reached up to tenderly brush Sarah's hair with long fingers. "We've been waiting for you to wake up. I'm calling a nurse to have a look at you. Don't try to move just yet, okay?"

Sarah tried again to wet her lips. "Thirsty."

Jordan turned quickly and then pressed an ice cube to her lips. "They said you could have ice. Is that better?"

It was heaven. Maybe not as satisfying as having a real drink, but it sure felt good. Sarah studied Jordan's face as she tasted the melting water on her tongue. The older woman looked tired and ruffled. "What happened?"

Jordan's face tightened. "What do you remember?"

It was too hard to remember. *Now* was difficult enough to comprehend. *Before* was impossible. Sarah closed her eyes and concentrated on getting as much moisture into her mouth as possible. Someone came into the room and Sarah trusted Jordan to handle it.

"She's awake," Jordan said. "She's talking and she's thirsty."

Fingers pressed into her wrist and Sarah opened her eyes to find an attractive nurse leaning over her. The ice cube was taken away as the nurse looked into her eyes.

"You are a very lucky young woman," the nurse smiled.

"Don't feel lucky," Sarah muttered. The words didn't come out clearly, but she didn't care. She felt Jordan's hand slip into her own and she weakly gripped it. "Home," she said clearly. "Want to go home."

"That's a good sign," the nurse said. "Let's see how you're doing and then the doctor will discuss that with you."

It was a brush off and Sarah knew it, but there wasn't much she could do about it. By the time her blood pressure and temperature had been taken, she could feel that she was going to fall asleep

again. Tipping her head slightly to catch Jordan's eye, she pleaded, "Stay?" Her eyes closed and she began to drift as her friend's lips touched her forehead.

"Sleep, little one. I'll be right here."

The soft words were like a lullaby and Sarah fell asleep to them.

~***~

She really had to pee. The screaming of her bladder was responsible for waking her the second time. Sarah remembered where she was and now she suspected why she was there. It had to have been a car accident, which struck her as rather ironic since she clearly remembered having her foot on the brake.

Sarah still hurt head to toe, but it didn't seem as bad now. Or maybe her body had become used to it while she slept. Whatever, she had to get up and find the toilet. One arm had an IV in it, so Sarah used the other to move the thin covers back.

"Whoa," Jordan's voice erupted. "Where do you think you're going?"

Sarah stifled a groan as she turned towards the edge of the bed. "Gotta pee."

"I don't think you're supposed to be up."

Using the bed rail, Sarah pulled herself into a sitting position and waited for the dizziness to pass. Nothing appeared to be in a cast. Her left knee was quite sore though. Sarah pushed the blanket further away and took stock. It was bruised and a little swollen, but if it wasn't in a cast, it was probably okay. "Can I walk?"

"I don't know."

The pain in the back of her head was bad. Sarah slowly lifted her chin and looked at her employer. "I have to pee. *Now*. Help me?"

Jordan looked at a loss for a moment and then shrugged. "Yes, ma'am."

The bed rail came down and Sarah slid her legs off the side of the bed with effort. One hand on the IV stand and the other clutching Jordan's arm, she put her feet on the floor. Feeling so weak was the worst part. It actually felt kind of good to be moving, even if all she could manage was a drunken shuffle. Her knee was definitely sore, but it was functional. Well aware that her ass was hanging out the back of her gown and unable to care, Sarah made it into the bathroom and onto the toilet. Just as Jordan closed the door, she let go of her bladder and groaned in perfect relief.

"You all right?"

Sarah relaxed with a sigh of contentment. "Oh, man. You have no idea how good this feels."

Jordan laughed on the other side of the door. "Don't bet on it."

Sarah leaned back against the toilet as her bladder emptied. "I was in some sort of car accident, wasn't I?"

"Yes. Do you remember any of it?"

Sarah replayed the moment. "Not really. Just a lot of noise and a jolt." She moved her tongue around experimentally. "I think I bit my tongue. It kind of hurts. *Everything* hurts."

Jordan mumbled something.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let me know when you want to get up. I'll help you."

Sarah sat there longer than necessary just because it felt good. When she was ready, Jordan came back in and helped her up. Turning to the sink to wash her hands, she got a look at her face in the mirror and gasped. "Is that me?"

"Temporarily," Jordan nodded regretfully.

Sarah gently touched the bruising around one eye. Both eyes were blacked, a bandage covered her nose and her bottom lip was split and swollen. "I look like I lost a fight."

"In a manner of speaking," Jordan said softly.

"How bad am I hurt?"

"Not very, considering the accident."

There was a bandage behind her left ear and Sarah poked at it cautiously. "What's this?"

Jordan looked away from Sarah's reflection. "Maybe we should get you back into bed and *then* talk."

Worried about Jordan's evasiveness, Sarah let herself be put back into bed. Finding the controls, she raised the back as high as it would go so she was sitting. Her little excursion had left her shaky and light-headed, but it was just weakness and would pass. Jordan held a glass of ice water for her and Sarah sucked greedily at the straw. Having water in her belly made her realize she was hungry, but that could wait. "Tell me what happened. Please?"

Jordan sat down on the edge of the bed with a sigh. "Well, I'm sorry to say that your car was completely destroyed."

There were different levels of 'completely destroyed' when it came to cars. Most newer cars were considered 'totaled' after a ten mile per hour fender bender because the frame was designed to absorb and deflect the impact from the passengers. The Toyota had been built in the days when *cars* were built to survive accidents instead of people. As long as the frame and the engine were sound, it could be rebuilt. The question was whether or not it would be cheaper to buy a new used car than to fix the Toyota. "Maybe I can pay Cirenio to fix it."

Jordan shook her head slowly. "You don't understand. It's a *total* loss. I don't think there are even any parts from it that could be used on another car. Cirenio took a look at it and he suggested a closed casket burial."

"That bad?"

"Yes. But don't worry about that right now."

Sarah felt a pang of grief. "I've had that car since I was sixteen. It was never really a nice car and it had a lot of problems, but it was mine."

Jordan nodded sympathetically. "Cars can be replaced, Sarah. You can't. It kept you alive when the chips were down. There's no better epitaph than that."

She knew that Jordan was right. The car had done its job over the years. It might even be fun to look for a newer car. One that had a heater sounded like a good place to start. She had been saving her salary and a good portion of her tips for the last several months so she had money. Maybe she could get Cirenio to help her look for a new vehicle.

Taking another drink, Sarah let her head sink back into the pillow and some of the pain eased. "When can I go home?"

"A day or two, at least. We'll know more when the doctor comes by later."

Sarah was starting to feel drowsy again, but she didn't want to sleep just yet. "I hurt, but I'm not hurt that bad, am I?"

"Not nearly as bad as you could have been, but there has been reason for concern. You seem to be doing much better than we expected though."

Sarah shifted her head a little and studied Jordan's face. "What did you expect? Why was there concern?"

"Maybe you should wait and let the doctor tell you," Jordan suggested.

"I'd rather hear it from my friend."

"Okay," Jordan said slowly. "You banged up your knee. They did an MRI and the results were good, but they think it will need a brace for a few weeks, just for the support. You've got a lot of

deep tissue bruising, especially on your torso, and they've been watching for internal bleeding and clotting, but so far, you're doing fine. You were wearing a lot of layers of clothing and they think that may have prevented more serious damage. It certainly prevented you from getting cut by the broken glass." Jordan sighed and went on. "It's pretty much a given that you've got whiplash. You'll probably get one of those collars later on. Your head took the worst of it though. You broke your nose and cracked your left cheekbone. You also hit your head hard enough to cause bleeding in your brain. They had to go in behind your ear to relieve the pressure. You were having seizures."

Sarah thought she should be more shocked than she actually felt. Mostly she just felt numb. Her hand crept back to the bandage behind her ear. "They did brain surgery?"

"Oh, it wasn't that extensive. They just drilled a little hole to let the blood out. The surgeon said you stopped having seizures right away. They had to shave a little of your hair away, but with your hair down, it won't even be noticeable. You really are very lucky to be alive and in as good a shape as you are. I'm betting you'll be back on your feet in no time."

Sarah closed her eyes and let all of the new information percolate. It was very strange to wake up and find that important things had been happening to her while she wasn't aware. "How long have I been here?"

There was a hesitation before Jordan answered. "Four days."

The world tilted crazily and Sarah felt lost. Four days? How could four days of her life be gone forever? It didn't make any sense. Days don't just disappear without some sense of time passing. *One* day, maybe, but not four. It put her out of step with the rest of the world. Sarah couldn't help her tears.

"Ah, don't cry, little one. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"I missed Christmas," she lamented.

"No," Jordan soothed. "We wouldn't have Christmas without you. We'll have it when you feel better."

Embarrassed by her tears, Sarah covered her face with an arm. "I don't have presents for you yet."

"We don't care about that, little one."

"*I care*," she wept. Jordan was touching her uncertainly, like she didn't know what to do, and it only made Sarah feel worse. "You guys are so nice to me and I don't even have presents to give you for Christmas."

"*What have you done?*"

Maggie's familiar voice cut through the room and Jordan jumped up from the bed. "Nothing. I was just filling her in and she's upset about missing Christmas."

"*Men*," Maggie barked in disgust. "Go make yourself useful somewhere. Lift something heavy or find me some decent coffee. Go on, now. I'll handle this."

Sarah surrendered to her tears as Maggie sat down at her side and gently pulled her into a warm embrace. No one had ever held her like this and as frightening as it was, it felt wonderful. It was the kind of thing a parent was supposed to do and Sarah let herself indulge in it.

"That's it, sweetie. You just cry all of it out. It'll make you feel so much better. Everything is going to be okay now."

Maggie's soothing voice droned on as she gently rocked Sarah tears and eventually the tears quieted. She felt empty and boneless. It was a rather nice feeling. Maggie was so warm and soft.

"You had us so worried," Maggie said quietly. "I can't tell you how happy we all are that you're okay."

"I missed Christmas," Sarah whispered. She just couldn't let go of that fact.

"Well, Christmas missed you too, honey. The whole day was just ruined because you weren't awake to celebrate it. I vote we reschedule for New Year's Day. It's not much of a holiday anyway. It could use a little sprucing up. How does that sound to you?"

"Okay," Sarah agreed gratefully. Maybe now she would have a chance to buy presents for the two of them. "Sorry I cried all over you."

"That's what shoulders are for, dear. Now, let me have a look at you."

Sarah was laid back on the bed and Maggie's hands checked her out. It was comforting to feel fussed over.

"Lord, girl. You look like hell."

It was not what she expected to hear and it struck her as funny. Sarah laughed as well as she could without making her split lip hurt worse. "You're not supposed to talk to patients like that."

Maggie blew a raspberry. "It's an old woman's prerogative to tell the truth. You *do* look like hell. Fortunately, it will all heal and you won't have any scars. Maybe a little one behind your ear, but your hair will grow over that. The Master had one of the best reconstructive surgeons in the country in to have a look at you. He said you wouldn't be able to tell you'd ever been in an accident once you've healed."

Sarah sighed. "I'm never going to be able to afford this."

Maggie raised her eyebrows. "What are you talking about? The accident wasn't your fault, honey. The fool who did this to you had insurance. You don't have to pay for anything. In fact, you'll probably end up with enough money from the settlement to buy a *new* car and still have a hefty chunk to put in the bank."

Sarah felt an extraordinary relief. She hadn't considered that.

"Jordan even got you a temporary lawyer, until you could pick one for yourself. Although, Melanie Schultz is very good. I'm not sure you can do better in that department. If you decide to let her handle the case, she'll do very well for you."

"It feels weird to hear about everything that's been happening while I slept."

"I'm sure it does, dear."

"What else have I missed?"

Maggie fussed with the thin covers, tucking and arranging them around Sarah. "I'm not sure where to start."

Sarah covered one of Maggie's hands with her own. "At the beginning. Please, I need to know everything."

Maggie stilled and seemed to come to a decision. "What do you remember of the accident?"

"Nothing, really."

Apparently, the man who rear-ended her thought that having a four-wheel-drive pick-up meant that he could drive the posted speed limit regardless of the conditions. Coming up behind her, his brakes had been less than useless on the icy streets. Slamming into her rear end at forty-five miles per hour, Sarah's car had been catapulted into the intersection. The other drivers on the road had been driving much more cautiously, but had been unable to avoid her. Two other cars (one from each direction) had spun her around, one right after the other. To top it off, a semi truck went into a jack knife trying to avoid the free-for-all and his trailer had come to a stop *on top* of Sarah's car, pinning it underneath.

To make matters as bad as they could possibly get, the semi was hauling gasoline and the accident had caused a serious leak. In spite of the snow and slush on the streets, it was a highly dangerous situation. The tiniest spark would have turned the street into an inferno. Sarah's car was pinned in such a way that rescuers were initially unable to reach her in order to learn if she was alive or dead. The opinion on the scene was that she could not possibly be alive inside the wreckage. Still, there was a sense of urgency to be sure. The problem was finding a way in without using heavy equipment and possibly setting off a firestorm.

Not long after rescuers arrived on the scene, an officer called the Toyota's plate number into dispatch to see if they could find out how many people might be trapped inside. When the

Estate's address was reported back, one of the firemen recognized it as Jordan's place. He was one of Jordan's players. Using his personal cell phone, he called Jordan.

"The Master was frantic," Maggie emphasized. "I've never seen him quite so out of control. Of course, we were all just scared out of our minds for you. And then, to get there and have your car pointed out to us . . . just a tangled jumble of metal under that truck." Maggie wiped a tear from her eye. "I just broke right down and cried. I just knew you were dead. I think we all did."

It sounded like a TV movie of the week. Sarah was fascinated. "I was still in the car when you got there?"

"Oh, yes. It was about a half hour later before someone finally got an arm inside the wreckage and said you had a strong pulse, and it was over an hour after that before they managed to get you out. There was blood all over your face and you were limp as a rag doll. They wouldn't let any of us ride with you in the ambulance. When we got here, they were taking you up to surgery because you were having seizures. Lord, we were terrified."

Maggie took Sarah's hand between her own with a sigh. "There's something you need to know. Jordan would keep it a secret, but I don't much agree with that."

"What is it?"

Maggie looked very sad. "While you were in surgery, the hospital suggested that someone contact your parents."

Sarah got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "They're not here, are they?"

"No, dear."

She sighed with relief. "Thank God." Then she considered the implications. "Did Jordan talk to them?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Well," Maggie began primly. "After he stomped the phone into the ground, he sat down and cried like a baby."

It was hard to imagine that, but if it was true, it made Sarah feel really good.

"The Master won't tell me exactly what they said, but we've talked about it and we've decided that since you don't have a family, we're keeping you."

"Keeping me?"

"Your parents might not want you, but we do. No matter where you go or what you do with your life, we will *always* want to be a part of it. It's unfortunate that it took this accident to make it clear to us how dear you've become, but we know now and we've no intention of letting you slip away. *We* are your family now. If you'll have us."

"But, you hardly know me," Sarah blurted out in shock.

"Don't be silly," Maggie scolded gently. "I don't need to know every single thing about you to know that I love you. There isn't one thing about you that I don't find utterly adorable. If I'd ever had a daughter, I would have counted myself the luckiest mother alive if she had been exactly like you. There's something seriously wrong with your parents if they don't feel the same way. I just can't imagine it. Maybe they're aliens or something."

Sarah's heart ached with the sweetness of the offer. It was terrifying to say it aloud, but she really wanted to. "I love you too, Maggie."

The old woman's smile was brilliant. "That's the best Christmas present you could ever give me, honey."

Jordan came back while they were hugging. "I brought your coffee, Maggie. And the nurses said Sarah could have Jell-O. I wasn't sure what kind you like, so I brought a selection."

The large hands were cradling a half dozen small containers and Sarah giggled. "I'm too hungry to care. I'll eat them all."

With Maggie's help, she only managed one before she felt full. The mood in the room was light and playful, even when a nurse came in and displayed some ire over not having Sarah's urine to measure and test. She was quite stern in explaining how important it was to follow the rules and scolded Jordan severely for allowing Sarah to walk on her bad knee without supervision. All three of them burst into laughter when she left the room.

Sarah's doctor came by while they were imitating the nurse. Short and round with beautiful East Indian chocolate skin and an unpronounceable name, he very efficiently gave her a thorough exam. Doctor Raj (as he suggested they call him) started with her eyes, ears and memory. It was a little hard for Sarah to understand his thick, musical accent, but he made himself clear enough. He even made her get out of bed and walk around. The nurse brought a knee brace and Sarah was pleased at how much better it made her leg for walking.

Doctor Raj also gave her a soft neck support, but laughingly told her that all it really did was remind her to take it easy. It made Sarah feel claustrophobic, so she took it off and told him she would remember. The IV was removed from her hand and Sarah asked the question she was most anxious to learn the answer to.

"When can I go home?"

"You are needing a CAT scan, young lady. We are first thing doing it in the morning. If all is

good, then we are talking about it. Before you are going home, you must be eating and your bowels must be moving. This is very important for showing that your insides are properly behaving. You understand?"

It was very hard not to laugh. "I can't go home until I poop. Got it."

"Very good. I come back tomorrow and tell you how the testing is."

Sarah looked at her friends when they were alone again. "Thanks for everything, you guys. Really."

Jordan inclined her head graciously. "You're welcome."

"I'm fine if you want to go home. I'm probably just going to sleep anyway."

Maggie raised an eyebrow to their employer. "You should take a break. Go home and take a real shower. Get some sleep. I'll stay with her for a while."

"I'm okay," Jordan insisted.

Sarah frowned. "Have you been here the whole time?"

Jordan shrugged. "It was nothing."

Her first thought was that Jordan had been wearing the thick vest for four days straight. Even if she had taken showers or sink baths over that time, she had still been putting the same vest back on each time. Only a true friend would subject herself to such a thing. And a true friend wouldn't allow it to go on any longer than absolutely necessary. "We both know that's not true," she said gently. "You've endured enough discomfort on my behalf. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, but go home and get out of those clothes. Please."

Jordan scowled. "Oh, all right. But, I'll be back for the night shift. Can I bring you anything?"

"Ice cream," Sarah teased. "And some sweats. Maybe a teddy bear or something. How come I don't have any flowers? Aren't I supposed to have flowers? And balloons? Don't you people know anything about visiting someone in the hospital?"

Jordan shook her head with a rueful grin. "I don't know what I was worried about. There's nothing wrong with you. I'll see you two later."

Maggie was studying her as Jordan left. It made Sarah a bit nervous. "What?"

The old woman shrugged casually. "Just enjoying the way you have with the Master."

"I don't have a way with him." Sarah adjusted her blanket. "We're just friends."

Maggie sniffed. "Well, if you want to go home, you've got bowels to move. More Jell-O?"

~***~

Jordan came back at nine that night in blue jeans and a leather jacket. It was not her usual attire and she looked really hot. But what made Sarah smile was that her boss had brought all of the things she requested. "You didn't have to do that," she said after hugging Maggie goodbye. "I was just kidding."

"That's what made it fun. Eat this before it melts."

Sarah dug into the Chocolate Chip ice cream with relish. It was her favorite and it felt really good in her mouth. "Yum," she said between bites. "I like the flowers."

"I wasn't sure what kind you like best, so I got a mix."

"They're really pretty."

Jordan tied the balloon bouquet to the foot of the bed and sat down in a chair. Running her hands through her hair, she relaxed. "Thanks for making me go home. I feel much better now. I didn't realize how grungy I felt."

Sarah stuck the spoon in her ice cream and reached out for Jordan's hand. "I can't believe you actually stayed with me the whole time. Thank you."

"I'd have gone crazy not being here, little one. You don't have to thank me."

There was no way to express how much it touched her, so she tucked the little brown teddy bear into the crook of her arm and went back to eating her ice cream. "I met the lawyer you got me."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. I hope you don't feel like I stepped on your toes."

"Not at all. She's kind of intense. Is she one of your players?"

"No, but I've heard good things about her from some of the players. She used to work for an insurance company while she was studying for the bar. She understands how they work. She'll get you every possible dime she can."

"And then take a third of it."

"I know. It doesn't seem fair, but it's the going rate."

"It's a good scam." Sarah sucked on a small chunk of chocolate until it dissolved in her mouth. "Which one did you talk to? My mom or my dad?"

Pain flashed across the blue eyes. "Maggie told you."

"Don't be mad at her," Sarah said quickly. "I had a right to know."

Jordan covered her face with both hands and then dropped them into her lap. "I don't think I believed you, you know. All kids and parents go through rough times. I just assumed that yours was a little rougher than most and hadn't worked itself out yet."

Sarah smooshed her spoon through the softening ice cream. "I like hearing you talk about how great your parents were, but I don't understand it. I don't have any frame of reference for what you tell me. It just sounds weird to me."

Jordan stood up and went to the window to stare out at the night. "I spoke with your mother, but I could hear your dad in the background. All they cared about was making me understand that you weren't on their insurance anymore. I offered to pay for a flight so they could come see you and she wanted to know why they would want to do that."

It sounded about right to Sarah. She could almost hear her mother's whiny voice. "What else?"

"That was it."

"Which part of that made you so upset that you crushed your phone?"

Jordan sighed and her shoulders slumped. "I told them you were in surgery and that we didn't know if you were going to live and your mother wanted to know if you had any money they were entitled to as next of kin."

Sarah shook her head with a smile. "Now, *that* sounds like the parents I know and love."

A low growl erupted from Jordan and her hands smashed down on the window sill. It shocked Sarah to the core and she realized that this really was distressing to others. It was exactly what she had come to expect from the people who had raised her, but she hadn't realized that it could upset people. Setting her ice cream to the side, Sarah eased out of bed and went to stand beside her friend. "Don't be upset, Jordan. I'm used to it."

"Can you even conceive of how *wrong* that is? It's no different than saying that you've gotten used to having a knife stuck in your heart. What they've done to you is . . . it's a perversion, Sarah. It's *evil*. It's *worse* than evil."

All she could think of was to make the pain in Jordan's face go away. Acting on instinct, she reached out to hug her friend. The taller woman gathered her in gently and began to rock from side to side. "I'm sorry you had to call them," Sarah whispered.

"No," Jordan said. "*I'm* sorry. Sorry that you had them for parents when you deserved so much better. Sorry that my temper got away from me. I just . . . you're such a good, sweet woman, Sarah. I don't know how you got that way, but the thought of anyone hurting you eats at me. It makes me crazy. I want to hurt them for what they did to you."

Sarah smiled into Jordan's neck. Maybe it was wrong, but it made her feel good to hear that. "Maybe I should introduce you to them. They would *really* hate you. A woman who dresses as a man and runs S&M sex parties out of her house? It would probably give them hives."

Jordan's snicker was encouraging.

"The icing on the cake would be telling them that I clean up after those parties," Sarah added. "We'll make sure to mention that the dildos are dishwasher safe. That would send my mother over the edge for sure."

Jordan laughed outright. "What would they say if they knew you were mooning half the city?"

Sarah's hands flew back to close her gown. "Oops. We can't have that."

Still chuckling, Jordan reached for the sweats she had brought. "Maybe you should put these on and get back into bed. You're far too active for someone who almost died a few days ago."

"The key word there is *almost*. I'm not going to let a headache and a twisted knee suck all the fun out of Christmas break."

~***~

When she was wheeled out of the hospital the following afternoon, there was a stretch limousine waiting for her. Every single one of her co-workers was inside. Jordan had clearly not known that they were coming and the fact that all of them wanted to be there to see her made Sarah cry. She hadn't been aware that they even liked her. She showed them most of her bruises and they talked about where they were when they found out.

Sarah learned several things on the ride home that Maggie and Jordan had not told her. There had been media coverage of her rescue and one of the maids promised to show her the recording of the news broadcast. Newspapers had covered it as well and Pete told her that he had saved them. The bigger surprise was that all of her co-workers had donated blood in case she needed it. Maggie told her now that the players had done the same. Altogether, a little over two hundred people had donated blood in her name. It was staggering that so many people had made the effort. Aside from her co-workers, Sarah understood that it had been done for Jordan's sake and not her own, but it was still impressive.

The next twenty-four hours were a blur. Sarah's headache had grown to devastating proportions on the ride home. It served to remind her that she really did have to take it easy. As soon as she could sit up without feeling nauseous, Sarah took a long, leisurely bath. Maggie helped her wash her hair and shave her legs. She felt very nearly human afterwards and took her pillow and teddy bear out to lay on the couch.

Jordan was at the big house dealing with setting up the New Year's Eve party and Maggie was cooking something for dinner when Pete brought her the newspapers that covered her story. He

read them to her in his slow rumble. Several other people had received minor injuries in the multi-car accident. Sarah studied the pictures carefully. "Where's my car in all of this?"

Pete pointed at the back end of the tanker. "Right there. About halfway between the back tires."

It was hard to tell exactly where it was in the grainy photograph. It was very strange to think that when the photo had been taken, she was in there somewhere. "Where is my car now?"

"On a tarp in the garage."

"Can I see it?"

Pete frowned at her. "I think not today. It will be there when you feel better."

There was no hurry. Sarah handed the papers back to the big man. "Thanks for showing them to me."

"No problem." He looked like he was making a decision.

"What is it, Pete?"

Pulling a clipping from his pocket, Pete unfolded it and looked at it before handing it to her. "I thought you should have this."

Everything receded as Sarah studied the candid photo. Jordan was crouched on her heels in the snow, one hand covering her mouth. There was naked grief in her eyes. It must have been taken during her rescue. Sarah accepted that Jordan kind of liked her, but this . . . it suggested that Jordan's feelings were stronger than Sarah knew. No one looked like that for just any one.

When she looked up, Pete was gone and Maggie was looking at her intently. Sarah didn't know what to say.

"What do you see?" Maggie asked.

"I don't know," she stammered. It couldn't be true. "He's a very sensitive person. He was worried about me."

"I think it's more than that, dear."

In denial, Sarah threw out the only defense she could think of. "I'm a lesbian."

Maggie's smile was fleeting. "I think we both know that your sexual orientation is not the hindrance you want me to think it is."

Sarah gasped in shock. "You know?"

"I'm old, sweetie. Not blind. I've always known."

"But . . . ?"

"It's no skin off my nose if the Master wants me to think he's a man. He carries it off quite well, don't you think?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"The real question is how you feel about him. Do you love him?"

It wasn't something Sarah was prepared to think about. That Maggie was even asking was a shock. "If you know, why do you say *him*?"

"I respect his right to live the way he chooses. This is America. The land of the free and the home of the brave. The Master is both. It is hard to remember sometimes not to get my pronouns mixed up. It's the real reason I call him the Master. It helps to cement his gender in my mind. How long have you known his true sex?"

"From the first moment I saw him," Sarah admitted in wonder. "Then, on Thanksgiving Day, I asked him outright why he was pretending to be a man."

Maggie cocked her head with interest. "What did he say?"

She started to answer and then changed her mind. "You should ask him yourself, Maggie. You should tell him that you know. He was relieved when he found out I knew. He feels invisible. Like no one knows who he really is. I can't imagine living a life where I couldn't be myself in my own house. I think he wants that to change, but he doesn't know how. He's afraid, I think."

"Men," Maggie snorted. "Even when they're women, they're dumb as rocks. I don't care what he is. I love him no matter what."

"Tell him that."

Maggie's eyes narrowed. "You love him too."

Sarah giggled nervously. "He's my friend, Maggie."

"Don't lie to me, girl."

Accepting that she was going to be hounded if she didn't come clean, Sarah sighed. "I don't know what I feel, okay? Besides, it would never work."

"Why not?"

"First off, he's a lot older. He doesn't want some kid fresh off the farm. He needs someone closer

to his own age. Then, he's stinking rich and well-connected. He had lunch last week with an Assemblyman, for crying out loud. He needs a woman who is at ease in that world. I don't have any money or class. I'm not even out of school yet."

"Is that it?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"I don't think so. But I notice that there's one very important thing that you neglected to mention. The one thing that would convince me that it's impossible for the two of you to love each other."

"What's that?"

"The dungeon."

Sarah was speechless. It was the perfect foil to the possibility of a relationship with Jordan and she had never thought of it. Not even once. In fact, maybe it was a little strange that she accepted the dungeon as fully as she did. It was part of who Jordan was. Sarah might not have any idea what Jordan actually did in it, but the dungeon would be a part of any relationship Jordan were to have. How did she feel about that? Oddly enough, it didn't terrify her. Probably because she knew so little about it. If she knew what went on in there, she would likely run screaming into the night. Could she be a part of that lifestyle? Did she want to be? She just didn't know.

"I have some books if you want to read them."

Sarah blinked at Maggie's words. "What?"

"When I first moved here, Jordan gave me some books to read to ease my mind. It wasn't what I thought it was all about. I'd be happy to loan them to you. In fact, you can have them. I'm not likely to read them again."

Sarah colored in embarrassment. "Um . . . sure. Thanks."

"I'll go get them."

Over the next two days, Sarah's bruises faded dramatically and there were times that her headache disappeared completely. She had to be careful or it came right back, but it was a definite improvement. It gave her the courage to approach Jordan about the party. "Is it out of the question that I work?"

Jordan paused with a broccoli spear halfway to her mouth. "You mean, tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. I know my face is still pretty messed up and I might not be able to work very long, but I'd like to at least try."

Maggie reached across the corner of the table to pat Sarah's arm. "I can loan you the money,

dear. You don't have to work."

"It's not the money," Sarah corrected. "I just want to *see*. I've never seen a fancy party before. I understand if you don't want the guests to see me like this. Maybe I could help in the kitchen or something."

"The way you look is not an issue," Jordan said firmly. "My primary concern is that you not overextend yourself. If all you really want is to watch, I can probably arrange that. We could set up a video feed right into your tv."

Sarah knew she should feel grateful for the offer, but it wasn't what she wanted at all. To say that, however, would be very bad manners. "Thank you."

Jordan set her fork down and wiped at her mouth with a napkin. "You want to be there? Is that it?"

Sarah tried to smile. "No, that's all right. It makes more sense for me to watch from here."

"I hate it when you do that. Thank god you don't do it very often."

"Do what?"

"Give in." Jordan folded her arms. "Tell me what you want, Sarah. I'll make it happen."

Irritated that Jordan was calling her out on backing down and embarrassed to be on the spot, Sarah tried another tack. "I don't want to be a problem. You don't have to make special arrangements for me."

Maggie unobtrusively left the table and Jordan pushed her plate away to lean her elbows on the table. "You're not a problem, little one. I'd like you to be there. I just didn't think you'd feel up to it. I'll think of something you can do that won't tax your strength and still let you watch all you want. Pete has your uniform. It would be a shame to waste it."

"Are you sure?" she asked hopefully.

"Positive. Don't ever be afraid to tell me what you really want, Sarah. If I have to say no, I will, but I'll always take your requests seriously. Asking for what you want doesn't make you a problem. How else are you going to get what you desire?"

"There's something else," she added reluctantly. "I still need to go shopping for Christmas presents. I don't have a car and I'm not sure I can drive yet."

Jordan slapped a hand to her head. "Of course! I can't believe I forgot that. It won't do for Maggie or I to take you, will it? I'll have someone pick you up at ten and take you anywhere you want to go. Will that work?"

Sarah nodded and wiped at a tear. "I appreciate it, Jordan. Thank you."

"What are you gonna get me?" Jordan asked with a grin.

It made Sarah chuckle. "I don't have any idea. I'm open to suggestions."

"I like toys and electronics. The whole point of Christmas morning is to have fun. Make me laugh and I'll be in hog heaven."

Maggie came back in with dessert. "If you shop for a fourteen year old boy, you can't go wrong."

"That sounds about right," Jordan laughed.

~***~

Wiped out by shopping, Sarah took an afternoon nap. When she woke up, Jordan had figured out what Sarah would do at the party that night. She had a digital camera and printing dock for Sarah and wanted her to wander the party, taking pictures of people. As the picture card filled up, she would download to the printer. At the end of the night, guests would be able to pick up their pictures and take them home.

"They're not going to look professional," Sarah protested.

"All the better," Jordan grinned. "They're not supposed to be art. Think of them as party favors. I'd much rather have candid shots than posed ones. If a couple asks to have their picture taken, by all means, do it. Otherwise, just wander the party and shoot whatever strikes your fancy. I have no expectations about what you'll get. Just have fun with it."

It actually sounded like a lot of fun to Sarah. She spent an hour with Jordan, figuring out the camera's bells and whistles, and making sure she understood the printing dock. Jordan had enough photo paper for 1,000 pictures and ink cartridges to spare.

Cradling the expensive camera in her hands, Sarah asked, "Are you sure you don't mind my bruised face hanging out at your party?"

Jordan reached out to tuck Sarah's hair behind an ear with a gentle touch. "Don't worry, little one. You look great. Besides, most of the people coming tonight gave blood for you. I think they'll take pleasure in seeing that you are alive and well. You may well find yourself the recipient of many smiles and good wishes. If you watch the others working the party, you'll see that I do not encourage them to be invisible. Feel free to interact with the guests. It's New Years Eve. Try to have a little fun, okay?"

"All right."

"Now, the guests will start arriving at eight, but I don't expect the party to be in full swing until about ten. That's when I'll want you to start taking pictures. You know the guest suite by the

solarium?"

"Yes?"

"It's set aside for everyone working the party. If you need to lie down or get away for a few minutes, that's where you should go. There will be food and drink there. You're not on the clock, Sarah. No one is. Do what you can without causing yourself pain or discomfort. If all you do is take one picture, that's fine. There's no pressure and no expectations. Understood?"

Sarah smiled. "Yes, Master."

Jordan rolled her eyes. "You're spending too much time with Maggie."

Sarah spent the afternoon taking pictures around her house, making herself comfortable with the camera's operation and learning how to use the flash most effectively. It was neat that she could look at the pictures on the little screen and delete them. It was much better than a regular camera.

For once, she had time to herself. Ever since coming home from the hospital, she had not been alone, even at night. Maggie was around all day, cooking and cleaning, and Jordan had been sleeping on her sofa. Not that she was complaining. Having people around who cared so strongly for her was novel and exciting. Sarah could hardly get enough of it, even if it did occasionally make her feel greedy and selfish.

She spent her time wrapping gifts and taking a hot bath. While she was shaving her legs, she thought of something else she could give Maggie. It was an odd thought and she mulled it over carefully. It came out of the memory of Maggie saying that her love was the best gift she could get.

When Sarah was in kindergarten, she had made a clay cast of her hand. All kids made one at some point or another. She remembered how excited she had been taking it home to give to her mother. It had been used as an ashtray less than five minutes later. Sarah had been crushed. Waiting until her mother's attention had been elsewhere, Sarah took it back. All these years, she had kept it safe and hidden. It was the sort of thing that only a family member would keep. Offering it to Maggie to keep would be like accepting the woman as her family.

But would Maggie see it that way? Would she understand what Sarah meant by it? It was terrifying to consider taking that risk again. Dressed in her robe, Sarah got the box it was in from the closet and went through it. It was only a shoe box, but it had everything she had managed to save from her childhood. Report cards, the few school pictures she had gotten over the years, a little red dress she had worn as a baby, a first place ribbon she'd won in a sixth grade science fair for a display she'd done on magnetism, her graduation announcement, the tassel from her cap, plus a few other things that had been important to her at some point. All of the things a parent should treasure.

After careful consideration, Sarah decided Maggie was worth the risk. And if she was going to do it, she might as well go all the way. Using the last bit of holiday paper, she wrapped the entire

box. Even if it turned out to be a stupid move, at least she could console herself with the fact that she had been willing to try.

At six, Pete called to say that he would pick her up at seven to bring her up to the house. Sarah protested that she could walk, but Pete would have none of it. Hanging up, she got the garment bag from her closet and opened it. She had not seen what she was to wear before and was pleased to find black slacks, a crisp white shirt and blue bow tie. Everything fit perfectly, but she was at a loss at how to tie the bow tie and put the cufflinks in her sleeve cuffs. She fiddled with them for a while, but they just didn't make any sense. There was also a little bag of tiny cufflinks and she couldn't for the life of her figure out what they were for. Giving up, she put on a pair of black shoes and stuffed all of the extra parts into the pocket of her coat. Someone at the house would have to help her with that stuff. Combing her hair back into a pony tail, Sarah checked to make sure that the still healing scar behind her ear would not be visible. After considering it, she decided not to wear the knee brace. As long as she wasn't twisting or crouching, it didn't give her any trouble. It should be fine for the party.

Pete arrived right on time in an electric golf cart. Pulling on her coat and slipping the camera strap around her neck, she joined him on the front seat. "Hi. I'm going to need help with all of the doodads that came with the outfit."

"No problem," Pete rumbled. "You'll want to hang on to my arm. Can't have you sliding off into the snow."

The ride was kind of fun. He didn't drive fast, but the cold wind bit into her cheeks in a most refreshing way. She was surprised that he drove her around the house so that she could go in the front door. It wasn't busy inside really, but there was an air of excitement nonetheless. Sarah looked around to see the changes. The first sitting room to the right had been turned into a cloak room. One of the maids was arranging things to her liking and sent a smile Sarah's way.

Music was coming in fits and starts from the ballroom and she headed there to see what was happening. It was fabulous! A stage had been set up in one corner and several men were working on arranging the sound system. Large floral displays filled up empty places along the walls and reflective ribbons with crystal stars on the ends hung from the ceiling. They were slowly twisting in the circulating air and it filled the room with rainbows. The over all effect was charming. This was not going to be an artsy-fartsy party. People were supposed to have fun.

The formal dining room was beautiful. The chairs had been pushed back to the wall and an incredible array of food decorated the table. The candlelight made it even prettier. Several caterers in their white jackets were checking the burners and arranging trays just so. Sarah smiled at them in passing.

Maggie was in charge of the catering service. Sarah found her playing Mistress of the Kitchen and had to grin.

"Don't cut right on the counter. Use that cutting board. That one right there. And you! Don't you have anything better to do than stand there? Go make yourself useful. Sarah! There you are!"

Why are you only half dressed?"

Sarah held out the extras. "I didn't know how to use them. I need help."

"I'll show her."

Missy, one of the house maids, was at her elbow with a shy smile. One look at Missy's outfit told Sarah that the little cuff things went in the button holes of her shirt. Maggie shooed them out of the kitchen and Sarah followed Missy back to the entry way where she got a lesson in cuff links. Missy showed her how to button her shirt correctly and put the little black studs in. Ultimately, they were useless, but they looked kind of cool when they were in.

"We'll have to find a guy to do your tie," Missy admitted. "I just can't get the hang of it."

"Okay. What are you going to be doing tonight?"

"Carrying a tray. Food and champagne mostly. At least I won't have to be stuck in one place. Last year I did the coat room. I got some good tips, but it wasn't much fun. You're going to be taking pictures?"

"Yeah. I'm kind of nervous about it."

"You'll do fine. It sounds like fun. Maybe I can do it next year."

Sarah looked around at the people hustling to and fro. "Where's Jordan?"

"I haven't seen him yet. He'll do a walk through pretty quick though. He always does."

Missy ran off to check on something and Sarah decided to take some *before* shots. It took her a few tries to figure out the best way to take pictures in the ballroom. She deleted the dark pictures and was surprised to see Amanda come into the room dressed like the other employees. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Amanda gave her a cat-like smile. "It has it's advantages. I get to be at the party of the year with my fiancé and make a little money." She reached out to tilt Sarah's face to the light. "You look *much* better than you did in the hospital."

"I don't remember seeing you."

"I'm not surprised. You were in a coma at the time and I didn't have a chance to see you again. I had to leave town to see my family for the holidays. I just got back yesterday. I'm *very* glad to see you well."

"Thanks."

"Let me help you with your tie."

Sarah couldn't see how it was done, but Amanda made quick work of it. It felt a little tight, but Amanda said it was supposed to feel that way. They both turned at the sound of Jordan's voice and Sarah's mouth fell open. She was *beautiful*. She was wearing a perfectly tailored tuxedo that accented broad shoulders and slim hips. Sarah had to admit that Jordan made a stunning man. She had the vigorously handsome face and a preternatural grace. *GQ* was missing a bet not having Jordan on the cover. Jordan's cummerbund was the exact shade of rich blue as everyone's bow ties and it made Sarah feel like she somehow belonged to the commanding woman. It was a very safe feeling.

"Let me hear how it sounds," Jordan ordered to the sound crew. *Auld Lang Syne* rolled out of the speakers and Jordan cocked her head to listen for a moment. "Turn it down a notch," she called out, nodding at the result. "Excellent. Thank you."

Sarah remembered to breathe as Jordan left the room without noticing her. "Wow."

"Yes," Amanda said in a sibilant hiss of appreciation. "He's very handsome. Charming, too."

Sarah felt a wave of jealousy. She knew it was foolish. Amanda was in love with Pete. It was ridiculous to see her as a threat to something she could never have for herself except in dreams. "He's not like most men," she said to make conversation.

Amanda's smile returned with a twinkle of her big, brown eyes. "I believe it's safe to say that he's not like *any* man."

Sarah found herself with her mouth hanging open again as Amanda glided away. Did that mean what she thought it meant? Did everyone know about Jordan except Jordan herself? As far as she knew, Maggie had not come clean yet about knowing. Maybe she should warn Jordan. Who knew how many others were onto Jordan's secret?

Sarah was taking pictures of the food table in all its glory when Jordan finally found her and spoke to her.

"Shouldn't you be resting?"

Being up close to Jordan's elegance was disturbingly arousing. Sarah had to swallow to find her voice. "I just wanted to practice. And it's so pretty."

Jordan smiled at her. "I'm only teasing you, little one. Just don't wear yourself out too early. Pace yourself. You look nice."

Sarah glanced down at her clothes and then checked to make sure they were alone. "You look amazing."

"Do I?"

"Very hot," Sarah elaborated. She was pleased at the blush that crept into Jordan's ears. "I suggest a big stick to beat off all the women who'll be after you."

Jordan lowered her voice. "When you're a man, a big stick only attracts them."

It was Sarah's turn to blush and she couldn't help glancing at Jordan's crotch. It usually wasn't easy to tell if Jordan was wearing something there, but it was tonight. Her blush deepened as Jordan softly laughed. The only safe thing to do was change the subject. "I need to talk to you later. It's not urgent, but it's kind of important."

"Let's talk now."

A caterer walked through the room and Sarah shook her head. "It can wait. Besides, aren't people going to be arriving soon?"

"All the good people are already here. But, I suppose I should get ready to do the welcoming thing. Go lay down for a little while so I don't worry. Please?"

She didn't want to go lay down. She didn't want to miss a single minute. But Jordan was right. She didn't have the stamina yet to last the whole night. "Since you asked so nice . . ."

"Thanks," Jordan straightened her tux and raised an eyebrow. "I really look okay?"

The touch of insecurity was endearing and Sarah couldn't resist unnecessarily adjusting the tall woman's bow tie. "It should be illegal for you to be so sexy."

Jordan gave her a kilowatt smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Sarah stepped back with another appreciative look. "Go do your thing. I'll see you later."

~***~

To Sarah's surprise, she actually did sleep for a little while. Throwing some water on her face and grabbing a quick bite to eat, she followed the beat of the music with a sense of anticipation. It was everything she had imagined it would be. There were a couple of hundred people at least and all of them were dressed to the nines. Most of the men were wearing tuxedos (though none as well as Jordan) and the women were decked out in evening gowns. Everyone she could see was wearing jewelry of one sort or another. Guests clustered in large and small groups, talking and laughing with each other. Some were dancing and others were eating and drinking. It was like finding herself in a movie. Any minute, Fred and Ginger were going to put on a performance.

She wandered aimlessly for a bit, unsure how to start. Then, a couple, not much older than herself, stopped her.

"You must be the one who was in the accident," the good-looking man said.

"Yes, I was," she answered politely. "Would you like your picture taken?"

"Sure."

"It's amazing that you're already up and around," the woman added. "I'm glad."

Sarah smiled. "Me, too." She took their picture, checked the small screen to make sure it looked good and told them they could pick it up later by the front door.

After that, she had a hard time keeping up with the demand. Almost everyone had something to say about her recovery. When the camera's internal memory was full, she slipped into the cloak room and started the download. Since she was going to be there for a few minutes, she offered to keep watch while the maid in charge slipped out to the bathroom and got something to drink.

The pictures were coming out well. Studying them gave her a chance to see how she could take even better ones.

The second round of picture taking was even quicker and on the third round, she started taking random candid shots, trying to capture people she hadn't already photographed. Using the zoom, she even got a few shots of Jordan working the crowd. At thirty-four, Jordan really wasn't that old. In fact, more than half the guests were older. But, Jordan was most definitely in command. She was the *presence* that everyone wanted to bask in. Their smiles were brighter and their expressions more vivid when Jordan was near them.

It was the women that made Sarah crazy. They were all but panting and drooling after Jordan. Casually stroking her arms, putting a hand on her chest while they laughed at something she said, using the crush of people to *accidentally* bump into her: one woman even pretended to wave to someone with one hand while the other squeezed Jordan's ass. It was pathetic.

There was one tall, svelte redhead who seemed to be hovering around Jordan like a moth to a flame. She kept slipping her hand into the crook of Jordan's arm like she belonged there. It didn't take Sarah long to see that Jordan was repeatedly excusing herself from the woman's company. No sooner would Jordan be involved with another small group of guests, than the redhead would insinuate herself back at Jordan's side and Jordan would be off. She should have found the whole thing funny, but Sarah wanted to take the woman outside and roll her around in the snow. Somebody needed to give that woman a clue. Preferably with a hammer.

When the novelty of having their pictures taken wore off a little, Sarah found herself able to concentrate more on selecting and composing her shots. She wanted to take some pictures that captured the ambiance of the event. Beyond isolated opportunities to use someone else's camera to take one shot, this was the first time Sarah had ever explored photography. She felt like her inner eye was opening. It was almost like she had never really *looked* at anything before. With the camera in her hands, she was looking at facial expressions, body language and surroundings in a way she never had before.

Amanda joined her as she took pictures of a woman dancing. She was happy and carefree and there were a half dozen men behind her with appreciative smiles on their faces. Sarah showed the best picture to Amanda proudly. "See those guys? I'll bet she doesn't know that they're enjoying how she dances. Do you think she'll like this picture?"

"It's very good, Sarah."

It *was* good. Maybe the best picture she had taken all night from a technical standpoint. Not that she thought it was professional quality or anything, but it made her want to learn more about the art form. Maybe she would make two copies of it so she could keep one.

Pete came up with a brief kiss for his fiancé and nodded hello to Sarah. "It's 11:30. Now would be a good time to clear the memory on that thing. Jordan does a toast before midnight and the balloons will come down. You don't want to miss it."

Sarah looked up at the ceiling of the ballroom and noticed the nets full of balloons for the first time. "Cool. Thanks, Pete."

She rushed off to print the pictures, making extra copies of the dancing woman and several of Jordan. Those she slid into the drawer of an end table with the hope that no one would find them before she could take them home.

The ballroom was crowded when she went back in. Sarah was too short to see over all the bodies. Slipping along the wall, she crawled up on a chair that had a good view of the stage just as Jordan stepped onto it and took a microphone from the deejay. Cheers broke out from the collected guests and Sarah got a great shot of Jordan's embarrassed grin.

"All right, all right. Settle down. Time is short and I have a lot to cover."

Her boss was a natural on the stage. She was relaxed and at ease. Sarah would have been tongue-tied and probably vomiting.

Jordan slipped her free hand into a pocket and lifted the mike. "First, I'm very glad you all could come and celebrate the New Year with me in my home. Not only does everyone look fabulous, it's a real pleasure to be around people who know how to have a good time."

About half of the crowd hooted and clapped for that observation.

"Before I pour the champagne and make the toast, there are a couple of things I wanted to say." Jordan paced a few steps and her demeanor sobered. "As most of you know, we narrowly avoided a tragedy last week."

Sarah lowered the camera. Jordan would *not* do this to her. Her stomach clenched in nervous dread.

"One of my employees was in a terrible accident. It gives me great pleasure to report that she is well and strong."

There was more applause and some of those nearest to Sarah gave her beaming smiles. Her skin was cold.

"She is alive to celebrate with us tonight because of four men. I'd like to introduce them to you."

Sarah was too relieved that she wasn't going to be dragged up on stage to hear their names. She did notice, however, that one of them was the first to have his picture taken.

Jordan stood to one side of the shuffling men and spoke in a quiet voice. "These men spent nearly two hours, under a truck, in a snow storm, in a rain of gasoline, cutting and peeling their way into a car to rescue the woman trapped inside. *Knowing* that the slightest spark would set off a massive explosion and fire. It could have been anyone of us and they would have done the same. Some would say that it is their job and that they get paid for it. *I say* that not one of them makes in a year what I spent on this party."

Jordan looked around at the silent room. "They don't do it for the money. They do it because they are heroes in every sense of the word. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them, and their families, for the daily sacrifices they make on behalf of this community."

Tucking the microphone under one arm, Jordan started the clapping. It quickly rose to a thunderous cacophony. Sarah joined in enthusiastically and then stopped to take some pictures. She was alive because of those men. They didn't know her (or anything about her) and still they had done everything they could to save her. They *were* heroes.

As the cheering slowly wound down, Jordan gave each man a handshake, exchanging a few quiet words with them. Lifting the microphone, she rounded on the crowd. "Apparently, I'm not allowed to give these men anything in gratitude. I'm kind of pissed off about that, so here's what I'm going to do. There's a punch bowl on the bar over there. I'm asking all of you to donate as much as you can to the Fireman's Fund. If you haven't got your checkbooks, write an I.O.U. I'll cover it until you can get it to me. When the party's over, I'll match whatever you've put in there. For those of you who think I've got more money than any one person should have, here's your chance to hurt me."

There was a lot of laughter and some teasing about having waited for the day. Jordan bantered with them for a few minutes. Sarah could see some people writing checks where they stood. It touched her heart that Jordan would do such a thing because of her. It was sweet and generous.

The firemen jumped down and were promptly backslapped and congratulated. Jordan waited for a moment and then spoke again. "Another thing. As of yesterday afternoon, 239 people have donated blood on behalf of my employee. Most of them are here in this room." Jordan's voice broke and she visibly struggled for control. "I can not tell you what it means to me. Fortunately, she didn't need it, but that you wanted to help . . . I will never forget it."

"Let's do it every year," someone called out.

"The Christmas blood drive," another yelled.

Maggie's voice rose over the hubbub. "They need blood all year long. Not just at Christmas. You can give blood every three months."

Another woman's voice cut in. "What if we had one of those mobile collection trucks come while we had a potluck? It would be a party and a donation drive all at once."

"It would be like the Elks or the Eagles," a man pointed out. "They do that sort of thing. We could do it, too."

Jordan put a hand up. "Let's table this discussion for the moment. It's worth looking into and we will. My point in bringing it up was to say thank you to all of you for caring. It was the last thing I expected and it touched me deeply."

"After all you do for us, it was the least we could do," a man called back.

Jordan nodded once. "Well, I do not take it lightly." She glanced at her watch and smiled. "Let's get the champagne flowing, shall we?"

A giant tower of stacked champagne glasses was carefully wheeled over to the stage and Pete set a case of bubbly next to Jordan's feet. Sarah took a lot of pictures of the pouring. She'd never seen champagne cascading into glasses like that before and it was wonderfully fun. Jordan took the one from the top and people started passing glasses back through the crowd. Even Sarah got one.

At two minutes to midnight, everyone had a glass and Jordan took a deep breath. "The coming of the new year is a time of hope. Hope that things will be better in the days ahead. I've been giving that a lot of thought over the last several months. It seems that no matter how big and bright our hopes and intentions, the universe rolls along exactly as it always has, giving us sorrows along with joys. There always seems to be a war, or a natural disaster, or a new disease or financial reversals. I fully expect the new year to challenge us in ways we can't possibly expect. So, I am not going to offer you hope for a better year. It will be what it will be. What I hope is that-this year-*we* will be better. No matter what comes, let *us* be stronger. Let us have more compassion. Let us be more tolerant. More honorable. More patient. Let us give more than we take and love more than we hate. Let us rise above our faults and embrace our virtues. Let us give to our adversaries the forgiveness we routinely give to ourselves. My toast to the New Year is that we all become the best that we have within ourselves, and then share it with the world. *To us!*"

Sarah raised her glass with every other person in the room. "To us!" The champagne tickled her nose and she sneezed. As Jordan counted down the final seconds, Sarah prepared to take more pictures. Everyone yelled, lights flashed, balloons gently fell, *Auld Lang Syne* poured out of the speakers, and the New Year started right on schedule. Sarah got a picture of Pete dipping Amanda for a kiss and another of Maggie hugging Jordan. Almost everyone was kissing and

beginning to dance. It was beautiful and lonely until she caught Jordan staring at her. Their eyes touched across the crowded room and Sarah felt her heart swell in her chest. She didn't feel so lonely anymore. Her best friend was right there and thinking about her. Needing to share some of what she felt with Jordan, Sarah put a hand over her heart and smiled. Jordan smiled back and mouthed something at her.

Confused, Sarah held her hands out to indicate she didn't understand. Jordan pointed to her watch and flashed all ten fingers. Sarah nodded that she understood ten minutes and mouthed *Where?* Jordan had to try three times before Sarah saw the word *solarium*. She nodded again in agreement and began moving in that direction. It was good that Jordan remembered that she wanted to talk to her. Taking pictures along the way, Sarah was all but invisible as she slipped down the south hallway and stepped into the solarium. The quiet was a tangible thing, the waterfall sounds only accentuating the sudden stillness. There was just enough moonlight through the windows to show her the path. Sarah stepped softly through the silvery fronds and sat down in a corner of the couch to wait. Laying her head back to alleviate the distant throbbing of a headache, she sighed.

She would have to go home soon. Her body was signaling that she had done enough and it was time for some recuperation. She couldn't be sorry, though. She had been allowed to see a beautiful party and watch Jordan at her suave and debonair best. Jordan's toast had been lovely. There were times when the older woman had a real gift for words. And that business with the Firemen's Fund. Offering to double it? It was classy. It warmed Sarah's heart to know that Jordan would do such a thing in gratitude for Sarah's life. She would probably have done it no matter which employee it had been, but Sarah wanted to think it was just about her. It was a harmless fantasy.

She heard the door open and close, and a moment later, Jordan was standing before her in the moonlight. "Happy New Year," Sarah said cheerfully.

"Likewise, little one." Jordan took off her jacket and lay it over the arm of the couch. Then she took off the cummerbund and began pulling her white shirt from her slacks. "Remember when you said you'd scratch my back if I ever needed it?"

Sarah stood up with a grin. "I remember."

"Good. I've got this spot that's been bugging me for about three years."

It took a couple of minutes to get her shirt open and for the sound of a zipper to release under her left arm. Sarah slipped her hands inside the thick vest at the small of Jordan's back and reached up. She wasn't nearly as sweaty as Sarah expected, but she was very warm. And soft. "Where is it?"

"Higher. More. Towards the right. *There*."

Sarah smiled as Jordan groaned in relief. "Harder?"

"God, yes. As hard as you can."

Digging her fingernails in, Sarah started on the trouble spot and then spread out. It seemed like scratching a small itch nearly always made everything itch. She might as well do the job right. Jordan's right leg lifted off the ground and began to twitch. It looked so much like Thumper that Sarah dissolved into helpless giggles.

"I'll double your salary if you don't stop," Jordan moaned.

"You don't have to pay me for this," Sarah said, still laughing. Moving her arms deeper under Jordan's clothes, she started at the shoulders, vigorously scratching until she'd covered every inch of Jordan's long back. Then she lay her hands flat on the warm skin and began rubbing away the fire it must feel.

Jordan had both hands on a branch above her head and the intimacy of what she was doing struck Sarah. All she had to do was slide her hands around the slender body and her hands would be full of the breasts she had never seen. It mattered not at all how big they were or how they were shaped. She wanted it so bad she could hardly breathe. Sarah knew she should stop, but she didn't want to.

"You have wonderful hands," Jordan said in a low tone. "You have no idea how good that feels."

Her heart pounding a staccato rhythm in her throat, Sarah licked dry lips. She had never felt a desire so large or specific before. It was wonderful in an out-of-control addictive sort of way, but it was terrifying, too. She needed to step back from it before she did something foolish. Pulling Jordan's shirt down, she moved to the couch and sat down, hiding the trembling of her hands under her legs.

Straightening her vest, Jordan turned with a smile. "Thanks, Sarah. I really needed that."

"Any time," she said without any feeling in her mouth.

"I'd better get back to work," Jordan said with obvious regret.

Sarah was surprised. "Is that what it feels like to you?"

"Pretty much." Jordan began the process of reassembling her clothes. "It's not a bad job really, but I can't relax out there. Everyone wants or needs something from me. You wouldn't believe the business deals that are being made out there tonight. They all want me to invest with them in one sure fire scheme or another. Those that aren't focused on business are arranging play dates in the dungeon. There are a lot of non-players here and they're not supposed to talk about it, but they do anyway. I'm glad they're having fun, but I'll be glad when they go home."

Sarah lay comfortably on the couch watching Jordan dress. It was incredibly hot. "That redheaded woman wants you bad."

"You noticed that, huh?"

"She's been chasing you around all night. Is she stupid or what?"

Jordan grinned. "Greedy."

"Have you tried telling her no?"

Unzipping the trousers, Jordan carefully tucked the shirt in. "In polite terms, yes. Her daddy is the Mayor. I don't want to be too rude."

"Is she one of the players?"

"No."

"Good."

The cummerbund was next and Jordan adjusted it precisely. She was pulling on the jacket when Sarah remembered what she needed to tell her. "Oh, I almost forgot." Sarah stood up and adjusted the bow tie. "Maggie knows. I think Amanda does, too."

Jordan frowned. "About me?"

"Yes. Maggie does for sure. She told me a couple of days ago. I told her she should tell you, but she hasn't, has she?"

"No. Are you certain?"

"Positive. I believe her exact words were, *Men, even when they're women, they're dumb as rocks*. She doesn't care, Jordan. Honest."

"Why hasn't she ever said anything?"

"Because she doesn't care what you are. She loves you no matter what. I wasn't going to say anything. It's kind of between you and Maggie, but if Amanda knows, too, I thought someone should tell you. *I swear*, I didn't slip up and let the cat out of the bag."

"I believe you, Sarah. Maybe I'm not as good at this as I thought."

"I don't think that's it. Maggie's been with you for years. She sees you day in and day out. I would be surprised if she *didn't* know. And Amanda . . . do you ever feel like she's reading your mind when she looks at you? Every time I talk to her, she looks at me like she can see everything I think and feel. I really like her, but it's kind of a weird feeling."

Jordan had a slight crease on her forehead and her eyes were far away.

"They don't care," Sarah added again.

"Some will." Jordan drew her eyes back to Sarah. "I don't worry so much about the players, but there are a lot of people who will only care that I deceived them. Pete's been with me for almost five years. What is he going to say? Hell, what is the Mayor going to think?"

It was a dilemma. "Maybe Pete already knows. Surely Amanda would have spoken to him about her suspicions. And does it matter what the mayor thinks? What could he do to you? Is he your friend?"

"Hardly. I personally can't stand him, but it's good for the players that he's here."

Sarah didn't really understand that. "Is it good for *you* that he's here? What do all these people do for *you* that you should sacrifice so much for them? Why do you . . . ?"

She halted abruptly. It was not appropriate to talk to her employer this way. Sarah dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry, Jordan. I shouldn't question you like that. It's none of my business."

"Why do I *what*?"

"Never mind." She started to turn away, but Jordan's hand caught her arm and pulled her back. Gentle fingers lifted her chin firmly and she had to look into Jordan's face.

"Finish your question, little one."

Her first impulse was to decline, but Jordan was serious. Not angry that Sarah could see, but she appeared to really want to hear what she was going to ask. "Why do you care so much about giving other people what they want and so little about what will make you happy? Are the two things so different?"

Jordan thought about it for a minute. "Maybe not."

That simple admission eased some of Sarah's nervousness at being so bold. "You don't do that with me, do you? Be what you think I want instead of being what you want to be?"

Jordan's smile was wry. "Actually, I'm more myself with you than I've been with anyone in a long time."

Sarah grinned in relief. "Good."

"In fact, there's something I want to give you."

"Christmas is in the morning," Sarah reminded her.

"This won't wait."

Sarah's heart stopped beating as warm hands cupped her face and full lips descended. Soft and tender, Jordan's lips lingered for a few seconds and then were gone.

"Happy New Year, little one."

She was speechless. Her lips were thrumming like a tuning fork. Her knees shook and her skin flushed with heat.

"Don't walk home in the dark," Jordan ordered calmly. "Tell Pete when you're ready and someone will drive you home. I'll pick you up for Christmas at ten. Good night, Sarah."

Alone in the dark, she put trembling fingers to her lips. Jordan kissed me! She kissed me? Am I dreaming? Why would she do that? It's the New Year tradition. That's all. You're supposed to kiss someone to start the New Year. Oh, God, I can still feel her lips. One little kiss should not make me feel like this; weak and achy and breathless. I am in so much trouble.

~***~

By morning, Sarah had convinced herself that it was nothing. Jordan was just being sweet or something. She was like that. It was ridiculous to think it was anything more than that. Jordan would never be interested in her that way. It would be best to just pretend it never happened and go on with her life.

Shuffling out to make coffee, Sarah got a big surprise. There were three gaily wrapped presents sitting on her coffee table. They had not been there when she had come home from the party the night before. It made her a little nervous to realize that someone (probably Jordan) had come into her house while she slept and she had not heard. Checking the tag on the largest box, she found a note claiming the gifts were from Santa Claus.

Sarah snorted. *Santa, my ass.* Still, it was kind of cute. Curious, Sarah tore off the paper and gasped. It was a seventeen inch flat screen computer monitor. The next smaller box was a brand new computer and the smallest box was a laser jet printer. Her current computer was so old that she couldn't buy programs for it anymore. All it was good for was typing her school papers and playing solitaire, and barely even that. It had the memory of a mayfly and she couldn't go online with it. The new one had enough speed and memory to fly the space shuttle.

Sarah dropped onto the couch and stared at her windfall. She couldn't accept it. It was far too large a gift for her to feel comfortable with. She would have to make Jordan take it back. Lord, it hurt to even think about that. She needed a new computer. It was on her list of things to get as soon as she could afford it. She had enough money saved to buy one now, but she was really enjoying watching her savings balance grow. She didn't want to dip into it just yet. Sarah doubted the cost of the computer even made a blip on Jordan's spreadsheets, but that wasn't the point. Just having Jordan in her life was all she really wanted. Letting the powerful woman get away with such extravagance would be like selling her friendship. Besides, Sarah knew she could never give to Jordan what Jordan could give to her. It wasn't fair.

The computer pleaded to stay with her while she made coffee and took a shower. It argued with her while she dressed and sniveled while she put on the knee brace. It tried cool logic as she waited for Jordan to arrive. Sarah hardened herself to its persistent voice.

Opening the door to her employer's knock, Sarah blurted out, "You have to take it back. It's too much."

Jordan raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Take what back?"

Sarah waved a hand at the boxes. "That. I can't accept it."

"Wow." Jordan stepped inside with a twist of her long body and leaned closer to study the boxes. "Very nice. Who's it from?"

"As if you don't know."

Jordan straightened with a frown between her eyes. "I don't. You think I gave you this?"

Now she was just confused. "You didn't sneak this in here while I slept? With a note from Santa?"

Jordan grinned. "As much as I would like to take credit, you're on your own with this. But, I think it's bad luck to refuse a gift from Santa."

"I don't believe in Santa."

"Apparently, Santa believes in you."

"Are you sure you didn't buy me this?"

"Hey, don't look at me. I wanted to buy you a car, but Maggie talked me out of it. Something about you needing to be independent."

Sarah's eyes widened. "You were going to buy me a car?"

"It's not like I can't afford it." Jordan tipped the computer box back and read the specifications. "I'm glad now that I didn't, seeing how upset you are by this. Do you like Belgian waffles?"

"Excuse me?"

Jordan let go of the box and stuffed her hands in her coat pockets. "I thought I'd make them for breakfast. With strawberries and whipped cream."

"Yeah, sure. Sounds good." Sarah wasn't sure what to think. She had been so certain that Jordan was responsible for the computer. Maggie was the next logical choice, but it was doubtful she knew much of anything about computers. Not to mention that the old woman would not have

been able to sneak the boxes into Sarah's house. She would have needed help. Maybe Pete, or even Cirenio.

Christmas had been set up in the empty bungalow beyond Maggie's. Between the two of them, they carried Sarah's presents over. Jordan asked about the brace and Sarah assured her that the knee was fine, only a little sore, and the brace was just a cautionary measure.

"So, what did you get me?"

Sarah grinned at her friend. "You're just going to have to wait and see."

"Ah, come on," Jordan whined playfully.

"You're a little hard to shop for, you know. You have everything."

"I don't have *everything*."

"Okay," Sarah conceded. "But, you have the *means* to have whatever you want. If you don't have it, it's a safe bet you don't really want it. That made shopping quite a challenge."

Jordan made a face. "You got me a tie."

Sarah laughed. "No, I did not get you a tie."

"Aftershave?"

Sarah squinted up at the taller woman. "Do you *need* aftershave?"

"Hardly," Jordan answered with a grunt.

She couldn't pass up the opportunity to tease. "All right. I got you a year's supply of tampons."

Jordan looked surprised and then suspicious. "You did not."

Sarah shrugged. "I figured it was one of those things that are kind of hard for you to acquire gracefully."

Jordan shook the gifts in her arms as if checking. "Liar."

"You got me," Sarah giggled. "But, if you ever need me to buy you stuff like that, let me know. I won't mind."

Jordan gave her an affectionate look. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Christmas carols were playing and Maggie met them at the door with egg nog. Sarah could smell the brandy in the drinks when she leaned in to kiss the old woman's soft cheek.

"Merry Christmas!" Maggie beamed. "Why don't you put those under the tree."

It was beautiful. Sarah had grown up with tired red balls, bits of tinsel and white lights on the tree. This one was nothing like that. Every ornament was different and there were so many it was hard to see the branches. "This is wonderful," she breathed. The multi-colored lights twinkled merrily and she was enchanted. Putting her gifts among the others, she began looking at all the different ornaments. There were mice, frogs, snow globes, bells, ballerinas, birds, Santas, snowmen; so many!

"Well, well, well," Maggie drawled behind her. "They're bigger than I thought they would be."

Pleased that her gifts were already being appreciated, Sarah turned with a smile and the wind was taken out of her sails. Jordan had taken off her jacket and...she had breasts! *Oh my.*

The tall woman was blushing furiously. "I figured since you knew, maybe I could take a day off."

"It's about damn time." Maggie reached out to pull Jordan's shirt tight across her chest. "They look good on you, honey. You should wear them more often."

Sarah looked up into Jordan's blue eyes and saw the uncertainty and insecurity there. It was strangely intimate to see her boss like this, but she liked it. Sarah smiled her acceptance and saw Jordan relax. "Wasn't there supposed to be breakfast? I'm starving."

Jordan took the diversion gratefully and Sarah was left facing Maggie. "I had to tell. I wasn't going to, but I think Amanda knows."

"No harm done, dear." She sighed dramatically. "It's going to be much harder now to keep the him's and her's in order. I didn't realize she was so thin. She needs some meat on those bones."

"She looks just right to me," Sarah said in Jordan's defense. "Different, but still good."

"That she does, dear."

"By the way, Santa left me a computer this morning. Would you know anything about that?"

Maggie hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "Your best bet is making a mess in the kitchen."

"She says it wasn't her."

Maggie considered her. "Do you believe her?"

Sarah shrugged. "I don't know. I want to, but that would kind of leave you as the culprit."

Making a rude noise, Maggie sat down and pulled an afghan over her legs. "I don't know the first thing about computers, dear. Besides, I thought you already had one."

"I do." Sarah sat at the other end of the sofa. "But, it's so old it could be in a museum. This one is top of the line."

"Well, then," Maggie smiled. "It's a good thing Santa remembered you this year."

Sarah suspected that both of the women were in on the gift, but she couldn't prove it. It was beginning to look like she was stuck with the computer. She was secretly looking forward to setting it up and exploring its capabilities.

~***~

The gift unveiling made Sarah shy and awkward at first, but the exuberance of the other two women quickly melted her reticence. Her own gifts were accepted with enthusiasm and it gave her confidence. For Maggie, she had gotten an old-fashioned pepper mill with the crank on the top. Maggie had once said that she wanted a pepper grinder someday. Along with the mill, Sarah had found a dozen different kinds of gourmet peppercorns. Maggie opened every bottle to smell them, passing them around and speculating what foods they would taste best with. Sarah also gave her a set of hand painted cat profiles made of wood that were meant to sit over doors and windows. Each cat had a different pose and color scheme. Maggie fussed over them lovingly and made Sarah feel like she had given her the Hope Diamond.

For Jordan, Sarah had started with a copy of *Chess For Dummies*. Jordan had pretended to be offended, but her laughter had filled the room. Sarah's other gift for her had been a set of remote controlled laser tanks. What had made Sarah think they were appropriate was that scoring a hit would deliver an electrical shock through your opponent's controller. It had been a gamble, but it proved the right choice when Jordan immediately tried it out and laughed boisterously over the stinging shock she got. Jordan pleaded with someone to play with her, but Maggie and Sarah laughingly declined.

For herself, Sarah made out like a bandit. Maggie gave her a beautiful hand sewn quilt of blues and greens that put Sarah close to tears. She couldn't even imagine how many hours Maggie had worked on the quilt with her arthritic hands. It was the persistence through suffering that touched her so deeply. Maggie also gave her a teddy bear (her favorite was still the one Jordan had given her in the hospital), a collectible doll drowning in lace (*Every girl should have at least one doll*), and a crystal angel ornament to start her own Christmas collection.

From Jordan, she got in-line skates with all the pads and a helmet, a gold necklace with a little heart-shaped locket, and the camera and dock she had used the night before. Sarah could see that she had gotten the better end of the deal, but Jordan and Maggie were so pleased with themselves that she hadn't the heart to complain. She thanked them vociferously instead, trying to convey to them how much it all meant to her. She was especially happy to have the camera and promptly took pictures of everything. Maggie even gave it a try and took some pictures of Jordan and

Sarah together. Sarah had every intention of framing one of those and keeping it beside her bed.

Soon after, she was bundled up and out in the snow making a snowman with Jordan. According to the older woman, it was a tradition she had not been able to enjoy for some years. It was kind of fun and they made a whole family of snow people for Maggie's yard. Standing back to admire their work, Sarah sighed with happiness. "I had a great day, Jordan."

"Me, too. Feel like taking a walk?"

"I guess so."

"Hang on. I've just got to get something." She bounded back into the cottage and came out with two bags of unsalted sunflower seeds. Handing one to Sarah, she said, "You'll need this."

"How far will we be walking that we will need sustenance," she laughed.

"Oh, these are for the birds and any squirrels who happen to run out for a mid-winter snack. I do this every year."

They headed for the forest, their boots crunching through pristine snow. Even with the sky overcast, it was beautiful. Except for the few evergreens, the trees held naked branches to the sky. The songs of the few birds she could hear only seemed to accentuate the stillness of it all. Jordan occasionally left lines of seeds along low hanging branches and Sarah followed suit. It had the feel of an ancient ritual and gave her a strong feeling of reverence for the life around her.

"How's your knee holding up?"

"It's fine." Sarah put a small handful of seeds in the elbow of a branch and trunk. "It hardly bothers me at all."

"Well, if it starts to hurt, say something. I can piggy-back you home if you need it."

It was a sweet offer and Sarah thought it could be interesting, but she shook her head. "I'll be fine." Looking back over their trail, Sarah spotted a bird investigating one of Jordan's offerings. "Look," she pointed. "One of them is already checking it out."

"You should have brought the camera."

"I wasn't thinking." Sarah looked up at her employer. "Did you buy the camera for me originally?"

"Yes, but it sure came in handy last night. I saw some of the pictures you took, by the way. You did a great job. People were quite taken with the whole idea. I think everyone stopped to find pictures of themselves as they were leaving."

"I'm glad it worked out."

"Did you have fun? Was it what you expected?"

"More. It was great. And you were fun to watch. You have such a way about you. You really are the Master, you know."

Jordan made a noise somewhere between a snort and a laugh. "It's all an act."

"I don't think so. I mean, it might feel like one to you, but it doesn't look like an act. You have an elegance about the way you are with people. There's a . . . *power* . . . in you that they respond to."

"Power?"

"Yeah. I don't know how to explain it, but it's there."

"What about you?" Jordan asked quietly. "Is it something you only see when I'm with others or do you feel it, too?"

"I'm aware of it."

"And?"

Wanting to talk about it and actually saying the words out loud were two different things. Sarah had to force herself to open up. "I like it. It makes me feel safe and protected."

It was several moments before Jordan responded. "I like worrying about you."

Sarah couldn't help feeling that it was an odd thing to say. "What?"

"I probably didn't say that right."

Sarah grinned. "You want another shot at it?"

Jordan grinned back. "Okay. I like worrying about you."

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "You're such a dope."

An eyebrow arched on Jordan's rugged face. "I'm a dope?"

"Worry is supposed to be stressful and you say you like it? That makes you a dope in my book."

Jordan tucked the empty sunflower bag in a pocket of her coat. "At least I'm in your book. That's got to count for something. How many people are in this book of yours?"

"Don't worry," Sarah chuckled. "There's a whole chapter on you."

"As there should be."

Sarah playfully reached out to swat Jordan's arm. It wasn't something she did casually, but it made Jordan laugh. Pouring the last of her seeds into her hand, Sarah moved over to a large rock and found a flat space to leave them. As she straightened, something soft hit her in the back. Turning, she saw Jordan reaching for another handful of snow. "Did you just throw a snowball at me?"

"Yep, and I'm gonna throw this one, too."

It was self-defense. Or, it would have been if Sarah had been able to throw straight. She had reasonably good aim with a softball, but snowballs didn't want to fly right. Screeching like children, they used the trees as cover and flung icy balls with far more enthusiasm than accuracy. Ducking behind a rock, Sarah made half a dozen snowballs for rapid firing. Peeking over her barricade, she looked for her target. Jordan wasn't in sight. Sarah rose a little higher and then felt something behind her. She whirled too late. Long arms encircled her and Sarah laughed hysterically as she struggled not to let Jordan force snow down the back of her coat.

Without any warning at all, Sarah burst into tears. Horrified and confused, she tried to get away, but Jordan only cradled her firmly.

"It's all right, Sarah. Let it out."

She didn't seem to have much choice. "I don't know why . . ."

Jordan began to rock from side to side. "It's okay."

Sarah availed herself of the comforting embrace for several minutes. It was so humiliating. Crying for no reason at all? She'd been having fun and she felt betrayed by her own heart. When she thought she had herself under control, she lifted her head and brushed at her nose with a frozen mitten. "Sorry. I don't know what happened."

"I do."

The confidence of that statement surprised Sarah into looking up. "You do?"

Jordan's hands smoothed Sarah's hair back and wiped tears from her cheeks. "Tears don't go away just because you don't cry them, little one."

Sarah made an attempt to take over fixing her face, but Jordan wasn't letting her. "I don't understand."

"My grandmother used to say that if you held your tears back, they would fill up your heart until there wasn't room for anything else. You have to get them out to let other things in. Things like being happy and having fun. I'll bet you've been suppressing tears your whole life. Twenty-one years of storing them up because no one cared if you were hurting or sad."

Fresh tears pricked her eyes at the truth of that.

"All of the times that you didn't cry are still inside of you and they need to get out. I think . . . I *hope* . . . that you are starting to feel happier about life, but you've got to clean some of the yuk out of your heart to make room for it. Does that make sense to you?"

It did, actually, but it couldn't be that simple. "I did cry sometimes."

"Did you cry? Or did you try *not* to cry?"

The distinction made her see things differently. "I tried not to."

Jordan nodded as if it all made sense to her. "Trying not to cry is all about being angry with yourself. That's why it hurts to do it. Real crying doesn't hurt. It feels *good*. After a really good cry, you feel like you can fly or do magic. That feeling is how you know you got it all out."

"I've never felt like that," Sarah admitted shyly. Then she remembered crying in the hospital with Maggie. That had felt good.

Leaning back against the rock, Jordan patted her chest. "Come here. Let yourself just be held for a minute."

With a surprising lack of awkwardness, Sarah settled into Jordan's arms and relaxed. It felt *right*.

"That's it, little one."

Closing her eyes, Sarah let herself drift. "I like it when you call me that."

"I like it, too."

The question she swore she wouldn't ask popped out of her mouth. "Why did you kiss me last night?"

"I'm sorry if kissing you upset you. I know it wasn't appropriate and I should have asked instead of just doing it, but I was . . ."

"I'm not upset," Sarah said quickly.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Was it just a New Year's thing?"

Jordan hesitated. "No."

Opening her eyes on the winter landscape, Sarah slowly disengaged from Jordan's warmth and

stepped back. She was scared and uncertain. Did she really want to know?

Jordan lifted her chin for a moment and then sighed. "I could tell you that I was a little drunk or that I always kiss the most beautiful woman at the party and it would not be a total lie, but it wouldn't be the truth either."

Sarah folded her arms protectively. "What are you saying?"

Jordan rubbed at her mouth before answering. "You've become very important to me, Sarah. I hardly think of you as an employee anymore. You're more than that. Much more."

"We're friends," Sarah said in a weak voice.

"Yes. You are my *best* friend. Did you know that?"

Sarah shook her head. It was shocking in a way. Jordan had so many friends. To be called her best friend was an honor. It was also frightening. There were implied responsibilities and obligations to being a best friend and Sarah had no idea what they were.

"Our friendship is the most important thing," Jordan went on, "but there's more for me. I have other feelings for you, too. Romantic feelings."

Sarah couldn't breathe. Jordan felt *that* about her?

The older woman frowned. "I'm scaring you."

Shaking her head to clear the fog, Sarah swallowed through a tight throat. "No. I'm just...You...*Me*?"

The frown faded. "You don't have to *do* anything about it, Sarah. I'm responsible for my own feelings. I probably shouldn't have said anything, but it's getting harder and harder not to. I thought maybe it was time to get it out in the open and see how you felt about it. If you're just not having feelings like that, say so, and I'll back off. I would never want you to feel like I'm forcing anything on you. I'd feel really bad about myself if I made you feel like you were being pressured into something you didn't want. Like I said, being your friend is the most important thing to me. I'm not willing to sacrifice that for anything. I'd forgotten how nice it is to have someone I can relax and . . ."

Sarah held her hands up to stop the flow of words. "Wait." Jordan stopped at once. Trying to wrap her mind around what she was hearing, Sarah asked, "Are you saying you have . . . sexual feelings? For me?"

Jordan twisted her mouth to one side and then answered, "More like *girlfriend* feelings."

Wrapping her arms around her head, Sarah tried to sort out what she was feeling. Hope, excitement, disbelief, fear, inadequacy: her emotions were caught up in a swirl of lunacy. This

wasn't the first time a woman had expressed an interest in something more with her, but it had never felt like this. Always before it had been nothing but an inconvenience to her. This was madness.

"Sarah?"

"You can't," Sarah blurted out.

"But, I do. Should I stop?"

"Yes!" She just wasn't sure. "No. I don't know." Sarah lowered her arms to find Jordan looking at her with concern. "You can do better than me."

"That's a matter of opinion," Jordan said with a straight face. "In fact, I'm quite sure *you* can do better, but I don't think I can. In any case, just because I'm falling for you doesn't mean you have to do the same. Tell me you don't think of me that way, Sarah."

She felt like a fish out of water. She *should* say it, but the words just wouldn't come. For the most part, she had played with her feelings for Jordan as if they were some sort of harmless game. They didn't seem so harmless anymore. This was real. More real than she felt capable of handling. All of the reasons against it came bubbling to the surface. "I work for you."

Jordan crossed one leg over the other. "I've thought about that. I promise you that I will never fire you. You do not have to feign an affection you don't feel to keep your job. Now, there's no real way around the fact that I sign your checks, but there's no reason in the world why I can't delegate my authority to Pete. I can take myself out of the loop and put him in charge of overseeing your work. If I give him the rights and responsibilities I now hold, I won't have so much power over you. Will that make a difference to you?"

Pulling off a glove, Sarah pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm too young, Jordan."

"You mean, I'm too old for you."

"No! I mean . . . How can you even find me interesting? I'm practically a kid and you're a grown up. You have your own house and money and everything. I'm not even out of school yet." She had to make Jordan understand. "I don't have anything to offer you. I haven't accomplished anything yet."

"I think you're fascinating, you know. You challenge me every single day to think in new ways and see things differently. I could care less that you don't have as much life experience as I do. You have enormous potential and I hope I get to watch you achieve your dreams. Besides, you're getting older every day. The differences in our ages will become less and less important as time goes by."

"You need someone with more experience," she pleaded. "I could never play hostess at parties like last night. I don't have your style and grace. You hang out with people who run things,

Jordan. You're one of the movers and shakers. I'm a nobody. I wouldn't know how to act or what to say to people like that. I'd be a liability."

"That's not true," Jordan said intently. "You are not a nobody and you'll be great at whatever you set your mind to. Do you think I was born knowing how to be with those people? Do you think it even matters to any of them if I act right? All they care about is my money. I could be a foul-mouthed, nose-picking hillbilly and they would still suck up to me."

"I don't have money, Jordan. They don't have any reason to suck up to me and excuse my faults. Don't you see? They would never take me seriously."

"I could give a rat's ass what anyone else thinks, Sarah. The only thing that matters to me is how I feel. But," Jordan sighed, "I hear what you're saying. It's okay to say no. I just hope I haven't ruined our friendship by opening my big mouth. Just forget I said anything. I won't bother you with it again. We should get back."

Sarah felt like crying. She had succeeded in pushing Jordan away and only now realized that she had wanted Jordan to overcome her objections. It was her own fault that she felt disappointed. It was unreasonable to assume that Jordan could read her mind. She was a lot of things, but she wasn't psychic. Sarah had to accept that she had let herself down.

"Are you coming?"

Jordan was standing a short distance away. Lost in self-castigation, Sarah had not seen her move. She knew in her head that letting Jordan go was the right thing, but she couldn't move or speak. Her whole life seemed to hang on the edge of something crucial and she wasn't sure what to do. She watched helplessly as Jordan came back to her.

"Are you alright?"

"I don't know," she breathed in a whisper of mist.

"What is it, little one? Tell me what you're feeling."

"Scared," she said numbly. She searched Jordan's face for answers, hoping against hope that Jordan would somehow understand and come to her rescue. But, that wasn't fair. Sarah did the only thing she was capable of doing. She reached out and took Jordan's hand.

The tall woman looked down at their joined hands and then took a half step closer. "What are you afraid of, little one? Is it me?"

"And me," she admitted softly.

Hope flared in Jordan's blue gaze. "Did I give up too quickly?"

Sarah leaned her face into the hand that cupped her cheek. "Why me, Jordan? You could have

any woman you want. Why me?"

"Why *not* you, little one? If you could see yourself the way I see you, you would never ask that question. If one of us has legitimate reasons to wonder if we are worth loving, it would be me. Not you. Never you. You are *extraordinary*, Sarah. You are everything good and sweet and amazing. You are smart and funny, beautiful and brave. There is not one thing about you that I do not find utterly bewitching. I admire your drive, discipline and focus. You inspire me. The sound of your laughter makes me happy to be alive and every smile you give me aches deep in my heart. You haunt my dreams and I live for the next moment I can spend in your presence. I hardly think about anything else. I kissed you because I thought I would die if I didn't and I feel that way even now."

No one had ever talked to her this way. It didn't feel quite real, but it felt wonderful even if it did make the fear rise. "Are you going to kiss me again?"

"Only if you want me to, little one. You don't ever have to do anything you don't want with me. Not ever."

"I'm scared," Sarah said again. "I've never . . . I don't know what to do. How to be."

"Be exactly what you want to be in every moment, little one. Do only what you feel like doing. I don't think it's unreasonable for you to be scared, you know. I'm scared, too."

That surprised her. "Why?"

"A million reasons. Mostly because it's so easy to be hurt when your heart is on the line. I don't like feeling so vulnerable, but I'll do it for you and be glad of it. I'll do anything for you. Tell me how to make you happy and I'll do it."

Sarah closed the distance and lay her head against Jordan's coat. "This isn't real. *You* aren't real and this isn't happening to me."

"It can be real if you want it to be," Jordan said into Sarah's hair. "Let's take it real slow, okay? Let's let it simmer for a bit. Give you a chance to decide if I'm even something you want in your life. I know I'm a handful. I can be difficult at times. Maybe we should date. Would you like that? We could go out to dinner and a movie. Maybe even dancing. Do you know how to ski?"

"No."

"I could teach you. What about miniature golf? That might be fun. Or maybe we could get tickets to a concert. You don't like rap, do you? I'm not sure I could make myself sit through a rap concert. I could do bowling, but rap is my limit. So is opera. Don't make me do opera, okay?"

Sarah had to smile. Jordan sounded as anxious as she felt and it eased her fear somewhat. "No rap or opera. Got it."

Jordan's arms tightened. "Do we have a chance? Is there even a little bit of hope?"

Sarah lifted her face and saw the insecurity in Jordan's face. It softened her as nothing else could. "I don't understand it," she said honestly. "I hear what you're saying and I can feel that you mean it, but it doesn't make much sense to me. I think I'm all wrong for you, but . . . maybe. I don't know."

Jordan smiled. "Maybe works for me, little one. We'll go as slow as you want. Don't let me scare you or put pressure on you. It's perfectly alright for you to say no or change your mind completely. Don't ever be afraid to be honest with me. I'll listen to you, I promise."

Sarah wanted a kiss badly, but she just couldn't say it. Even knowing that Jordan wanted to didn't make it easier. She had no difficulty at all in taking what she wanted from strangers, but this was very different. This wasn't about satisfying an itch. It was far more.

Jordan's tongue darted out to wet her full lips. "May I kiss you?"

Heart drumming in her throat, Sarah nodded slightly and closed her eyes as Jordan's face came closer. She had not imagined the softness of Jordan's lips or their effect on her. Sarah's entire awareness was focused on the gentle exploration. Nothing else existed. When Jordan pulled back slightly, Sarah reached up without thinking to pull the dark head back down. Her lips opened under the renewed pressure and Sarah moaned involuntarily as Jordan's tongue slipped into her mouth. It was so soft and tasted faintly of strawberries. Sarah sucked on it and then curled her own tongue around it.

Jordan was suddenly closer and more intent. Excitement raced through Sarah's body and the kiss deepened. No kiss had ever created this need spiraling within her. It felt... *necessary*. Sarah poured herself into it, giving everything she could to Jordan's mouth.

Jordan groaned deep in her chest and gradually brought the kiss to an end. Foreheads pressed together, they gasped for breath, sucking the chill air deep into their lungs. "Yikes," Jordan murmured.

It made Sarah giggle. "Yikes?"

"Sorry. Best I could do under the circumstances."

The fear was gone. Sarah wrapped her arms around Jordan's shoulders and hugged her tightly. "That was amazing." She laughed out loud as Jordan lifted her off the ground and swung her in circles.

"She kissed me!" Jordan yelled out to the trees.

Hearing Jordan's happy shout brought tears back to Sarah's eyes. As they came to a halt, Sarah pulled back and looked into Jordan's smiling face. There were tears in her eyes as well. Putting her hands in Jordan's dark hair, she leaned in to touch the full lips with her own. "You have the

softest tongue," she whispered.

"If I'd known you could kiss like that, I'd have done it much sooner," Jordan teased. "You're incredible."

It was sweet of Jordan to say that. Sarah hugged her again, unable to express the intensity of what she was feeling.

"Oh, God," Jordan sighed as she put Sarah back on her feet. "I'd like nothing better than to stand out here for a week or so just kissing you, but we should probably get back. Maggie will start Christmas dinner soon and I usually help. Once she gets it started, maybe we could set up your computer?"

"Okay." Sarah pulled her mittens back on. She was feeling awkward again and she didn't like it. It made her feel like she was stupid and naive.

"So, can I piggy-back you home?"

Sarah forced herself to laugh. "I'm kind of heavy, Jordan."

"No, you aren't. Besides, it will be like hugging all the way back and it will make me feel really butch. Please?"

Searching Jordan's face and finding a need there, Sarah conceded. It was weird at first, but then she relaxed. It *was* like hugging and she felt better being in contact with Jordan. The strong woman walked easily through the snow, taking a more direct route back to the cottages. Sarah rubbed her face against the short, dark hair. "Your hair is really soft."

"Thank you. So is yours."

"This is kind of fun."

"Thanks for letting me do it."

"Maybe I'll hire you to cart me around at school."

"I work for kisses," Jordan said lightly.

Sarah laughed softly. "Maybe I'll have a shirt made for you that says that."

Jordan laughed briefly and hitched Sarah a little higher around her hips. "Listen. Pete and Amanda are getting married on Valentine's Day. My invitation is for two. Will you come with me as my date?"

Sarah frowned. "You don't think they'll mind?"

"Of course not."

"What about Maggie?"

"I think she's planning on taking her friend, Hazel. Have you met Hazel?"

"I don't think so."

"They play bridge on Fridays with another couple of women. It rotates from house to house, so it's only here at Maggie's place once a month."

"Oh."

"Will you be my date?"

Sarah bit her lip thoughtfully. "I've never been to a wedding. What should I wear?"

"I would imagine it will be pretty casual, but you might not want to go with jeans and a T-shirt."

"What are you going to wear?"

"I'm standing up with Pete, so I'll be in a tux."

Sarah grinned. "You look good in a tuxedo."

"So you said last night."

"Maybe I'll wear a dress."

"Ooh. I'd like that."

"You would," Sarah teased. Then she considered it. "Do you like feminine women?"

"I like *you*. I could care less what you wear."

"Be serious," she admonished gently. "What do you like?"

"It depends on the circumstances, little one. Would I like to see you in a dress? Absolutely. I'd get a real charge out of having you all dolled up on my arm. But, I like the way your jeans fit, too. You're a beautiful woman and I've yet to see you in anything that wasn't flattering in one way or another."

"Even that hospital gown?"

"It had its good points," Jordan answered smugly. "One in particular."

"You looked?"

"Oh, yeah."

Sarah hugged Jordan's neck harder and nipped at her ear. "You're a pig."

"I know."

~***~

Uncertain as to whether or not she really intended to give Maggie her childhood keepsakes, Sarah had pushed the gift far back under the tree and forgotten about it. When she and Jordan arrived back at the cottage, Maggie had it all out on the dining table. Sarah stopped dead, her belly churning. Her eyes lifted fearfully from the memorabilia to Maggie's face.

The old woman turned in her chair and held her arms out. "Come here, Sarah."

Numb, she approached. Maggie's arms embraced her hard and Sarah felt tears come to her eyes again. "You said we were family," she said tentatively. "I thought . . . if we are . . . maybe you should have this stuff."

Maggie burst into tears. "You've made me so happy, honey."

Sarah sank to her knees in relief.

"You have to tell me about all of it," Maggie said earnestly. "I want the memories to go with every piece so I can brag about my girl."

It was-quite simply-the best moment of her entire life. Something inside of her spirit unraveled and Sarah wept freely. Jordan was right. It did feel good.

~***~

On the advice of her attorney, Sarah had Maggie drive her into town the next day where she rented a car. Apparently the cost would be returned to her when a settlement was reached. Sarah got the smallest, cheapest car she could. It was a million times better than her Toyota had been. Driving it was a real pleasure.

Now that she was mobile again, she headed out to take care of business. First was school. Sarah bought her course books and got a parking sticker, then just made it on time to an appointment with Dr. Danby for a follow up exam. The stitches were taken out of her head and the Doctor seemed happy with her progress. Sarah remembered to ask for a note saying she could go back to work. Jordan hadn't said she would need one, but it seemed like a good idea.

After that was done, she stopped at a grocery store to buy supplies. Maggie and Jordan had been keeping her in food since coming home from the hospital and it was time to get back on her feet.

She was tired when she got back home.

Shortly after waking up from a nap, Pete came by with a cable modem to get her hooked up to the Internet. He explained that it was considered part of the utilities. Sarah thought that might be an exaggeration, but was too excited to protest. Of course, she had been online before in libraries and coffee shops, but never in the privacy of her own home. He guided her through setting up the connection and creating an e-mail account, then helped her set up a buddy list in Instant Messenger with his own name and Jordan's. No sooner had she done so than a window popped up.

Mastercrisp99: I see you!

Sarah laughed in delight and looked over her shoulder. "Thanks, Pete."

He patted her shoulder. "Call me if you have any problems."

"I will." He left the house as she typed in a response.

Littleone777: Hey! Thanks for hooking me up.

Mastercrisp99: No problem. Love your screen name.

Littleone777: This is so cool. It's like being on the phone, but not.

Mastercrisp99: How was your day?

Littleone777: Good. Got my books and did some shopping. The Doc says I'm doing well. She even gave me a note saying I can work again. I love the little car I rented. Didn't realize how truly crappy my old car was.

Mastercrisp99: Speaking of which, what do you want us to do with the old one?

Sarah hesitated as that reality caught up with her.

Littleone777: Forgot it was still here. I guess I should go see it.

Mastercrisp99: Meet you down there in 20 minutes?

Little one777: Okay.

As Pete had so carefully explained to her, the nature of the cable modem was such that whether she was online or not, when the computer was on it was connected to the Internet. There wasn't anything on her computer as yet that was worth hacking, but Sarah was cautious. She shut it all down before grabbing her coat and heading for the garage. It was a clear day, but the wind was blowing quite hard, making it colder. Hugging herself for warmth, she stayed on the road because it had been plowed and was easier than slogging through the knee deep snow.

The garage was warm and toasty. Stamping excess snow from her shoes, Sarah turned on a light and looked around for her car. At the far end of the large room, she saw the corner of a blue tarp on the floor. Passing Jordan's cars, she got her first look at what was left of her Celica.

It took a moment to wrap her mind around what she was seeing. The image in her head was of a giant ripping the top off, then grabbing the front and rear in massive hands and twisting it. Only two of the flat tires were touching the ground and one of them was laying on its side. Sarah took a step closer and tried to see where she had been in the car. Even with the top gone, it looked impossible. The engine was in the passenger seat and the dash covered most of the driver's side. She must have been in there somewhere. The seat belt had been cut and Sarah had to assume she had still been in it at the time. But where?

The stench of gasoline was strong and Sarah felt her knees wobble as she finally understood that it really was a miracle she was alive. Not only alive, but healthy and whole. *Maybe* it was possible to live through that, but she should have been in a lot worse shape.

Long arms circled her from behind and Sarah leaned back gratefully into the tall body. "Where was I?" she asked.

"I just don't know," Jordan said quietly. "I come down here sometimes to look at it and I can't figure it out."

Sarah shook her head. "It's almost enough to make me believe in God."

"I know what you mean."

"Do you believe in God, Jordan?"

"Not if you mean the old white guy on a throne, no."

"But you believe in something?"

Jordan took a heavy breath and let it out. "I believe that God is the universe aware of itself."

Sarah instantly perceived the elegance of that statement. Her mind expanded in a new way.

"I see the universe as an organism. One that is aware of its existence," Jordan continued. "Every speck of dust and area of vacuum is part of that organism. I do not believe that the universe is something separate from us. We are simply a part of the whole, but we do have a unique position. As thinking beings aware of our own selves and the universe at large, I see us as part of the awareness of God. God is not *other*, but within us. Individually and collectively, we have the capacity to create the divine. On the other hand, we also have the capacity to create evil. It is a terrible responsibility." Her hand gestured to the wreckage. "When something like this happens, it's easy for me to believe that there's some magic in the universe as well. I can't see any other way to explain it."

Sarah hugged Jordan's arms. "It's a beautiful theory." She sighed over the twisted hunk of metal. "I don't have the first clue what to do with the car. I suppose it should go to a junk yard, but how? Who do I call?"

"Cirenio will handle it. He'll be glad to get rid of it. He says it's depressing."

"How much will it cost to have it moved?"

"Don't worry about that."

Sarah twisted to look up at Jordan. "No, you may not pay to have it disposed of. I can do that. I just need some advice on how to get it done."

Jordan's smile was fleeting. "Okay. Cirenio will be back tomorrow. I'll let you work it out with him."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Sarah looked back at what had once been her car. "He's right, you know. It is depressing. It's going to give me nightmares."

[Continued...](#)

[BadSquirrel's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references

dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Three

The first day back at school was exciting. Sarah's education was almost complete. She could see the end of all her hard work and determination and was looking forward to the chance to put it to use. Of course, she was not naive enough to think that she was going to graduate and be an instant success. What she had was book learning. Once she had her sheepskin, she would have to spend some time in the real world getting more practical experience. It would be some time before she was ready to strike out on her own in the business world. She didn't even know what kind of business she wanted to run. It was something she was going to have to think about.

In her last class of the day, there were two of her old dorm-mates. Sarah had to concentrate to remember their names and was glad she had when they approached her after class. "Hi, Lisa. Bonnie. How are you?"

Lisa popped her gum. "Good. What happened to your face?"

Sarah hitched her pack over one shoulder. "Car accident."

Bonnie's brown eyes widened. "Wait a minute. Were you in that big accident? The one down on Lennox and Broadway? I heard a student was involved."

Sarah nodded. "That was me."

"Holy cow," Bonnie breathed. She elbowed Lisa. "Remember that? The one with the tanker leaking gas all over?"

Lisa looked Sarah up and down. "You look pretty good. Which car were you in?"

"The one under the truck."

"No shit?"

Sarah stepped out into the hall without answering and the girls flanked her. "How was your Christmas vacation?"

"Oh, same old, same old. You know how it is with family. They still think I'm a little girl instead of a grown up."

Sarah kept her opinion to herself. "How are things in the dorm?"

Bonnie shrugged. "About the same. How's your job working out?"

"Great."

"And you live there?"

Sarah smiled. "Yeah. It's an estate. I've got a little one bedroom cottage behind the big house with a yard and everything."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I clean house on the weekends. Part of it anyway. There's a whole staff to take care of the house and the grounds. I live next door to the cook."

"Wow," Lisa said. "Sounds like quite a place."

"It is."

Bonnie snorted. "I don't think I could work for people like that."

"I didn't think I could either," Sarah said in defense of Jordan, "but my boss is really cool. He's not all stuffy and proper. He's actually a lot of fun."

Lisa pushed a door open and they stepped out into a light snow. "Listen. We were kind of wondering if you would be interested in a study group. We talked to Molly-she was in one with you last year-and she said you were really good to work with. Me and Bon can use all the help we can get. What do you say?"

It sounded more like they needed a tutor than a study partner, but Sarah considered it. Sometimes helping someone else understand things cemented the information more firmly in her own mind. Besides, it was like being social. She needed more of that in her life. "When and where?"

Both young women grinned and Bonnie answered. "We were thinking the Student Union sometime on Fridays, but maybe we could do it at your place?"

"Maybe," Sarah conceded cautiously. Comparing their schedules, they agreed to meet on Friday morning at eleven between classes. Sarah had a little bounce in her step as she headed for her car. Her life was getting back on track and it felt good.

~***~

"This would be a lot more fun if it were strip chess."

Sarah grinned. Jordan looked pretty grumpy about the way the game was going. "So, losing is okay if somebody's naked?"

Jordan's eyebrows rose. "If somebody's naked, nobody's losing."

"I see."

"Couldn't you sort of *let* me win once? Just so I don't get discouraged?"

Sarah reached out and turned the board around. "That's the best I can do. It's my turn now."

There was a new light in Jordan's eyes as Sarah considered her options. If she were playing herself, there was no way to win. At best, she could delay the inevitable by three moves. But, since she was playing Jordan, maybe there was a chance. If she lost, fine, but she had to do her best. She didn't know any other way to play.

In the end, she just couldn't overcome the disadvantage Jordan had been in. She had seen the outcome six moves before mate, but Sarah played it out for Jordan's sake.

"Checkmate."

Sarah toppled her king with an easy grin. "Congratulations."

Jordan polished her knuckles on her shirt with a lopsided smile. "Thanks."

Brushing her hair back, Sarah asked, "Why do you still play with me if you hate losing so bad? I've offered to play other games. Why chess?"

Jordan shrugged and began putting the pieces back in their box. "You like to play and I like to see you happy."

"I don't want to play anymore if you're only doing it because you think I like to win."

"You don't like to win?"

"Of course, I do, but not at your expense. You hide it pretty well, but I know how much you hate losing. At first, it was kind of funny, but it's starting to make me feel bad. I mean, it's really sweet of you to make the sacrifice, but I don't need you to do that. We don't have to play games at all. We could watch the news and it would be okay with me."

"All right," Jordan conceded. "No more chess."

"You'll still come on Tuesdays, right?"

Jordan smiled. "I'd like to, yes."

Relieved that she had been able to express something that had been bothering her without screwing it up, Sarah smiled back. "Good."

Jordan sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "So. This watching the news idea . . . Does it involve snuggling on the couch?"

"It could," Sarah said shyly.

"Maybe we should practice," Jordan suggested seriously. "It's not as easy as it looks, you know."

Sarah knew she was being tweaked and chose to play along. "It's not?"

"Lord, no. It can be quite difficult. There are many ways to snuggle and they all have advantages and disadvantages. Finding the one that works best for us could take quite a while. Then there's the whole remote thing. Somebody's got to hold it, you know. It's a lot of responsibility. We might have to practice a lot before we get good at it."

There were times when Jordan was almost unbearably adorable. This was definitely one of those times. "I don't feel like being responsible, so maybe you'd better handle the remote."

Jordan nodded sagely, but her eyes were dancing. "Do you want to start with a side by side snuggle? Maybe a half on and half off snuggle? Or you could lay with your head in my lap."

Sarah tried to keep from grinning. "I don't know. It sounds like you know a lot more about this than I do. It might be better if you took charge."

From the slow smile and smoldering look she got, it seemed she had said exactly the right thing. It occurred to her that being in charge was probably what Jordan liked. Sarah was usually in charge when it came to physical intimacy, but this was different. Emotional intimacy was new to her. She realized in a flash of insight that she trusted Jordan. Not just to be gentle with her, but also to teach her how to be close. It was like the dancing. If she gave up control, Jordan would guide her and it would be beautiful. It was a little frightening, but it was also comforting to know that she didn't have to have all the answers.

It turned out that snuggling wasn't hard at all. Sarah fit into Jordan's side like she had always belonged there. It took her a moment to really relax, but when she did, it felt better than anything she'd ever felt before. Jordan wasn't wearing her vest and there was no doubt that Sarah was holding a woman. With her ear pressed to Jordan's shoulder, Sarah smiled. "Your heart is racing."

"You have that effect on me." The television came on and Jordan flipped through several

channels. Jordan settled herself a bit and then began to rub Sarah's arm where it lay across her middle. "This is so much better than chess."

Sarah felt so happy she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She did neither, electing instead to crawl inside of the feeling and let it consume her. The drone of the television was far away and inconsequential. People did this all the time like it meant nothing. They were fools. How could anyone take this feeling for granted? Sliding an arm behind Jordan's waist, Sarah pulled her knees up and let them fall over Jordan's thighs. If she could spend the rest of her life just like this, she would die feeling like she had not wasted a single moment.

Without meaning to, Sarah snoozed for a while. She woke up with Jordan's arms around her, holding her securely. Taking a deep breath to let Jordan know that she was awake, Sarah apologized. "Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

Jordan pressed a kiss to Sarah's temple. "I don't mind one bit, little one. Holding you while you sleep is my new favorite thing in the whole world."

Sarah tipped her head back and smiled up at the woman holding her. "Do you practice being charming?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do," Jordan answered without missing a beat. "I've got this big mirror and I practice for an hour every morning."

"You probably do," Sarah giggled. "You're such a nut."

Jordan smiled and ran her hand through Sarah's hair. "You're so beautiful."

Sarah blushed. She'd heard it before, but this was the first time it really meant anything. It was hard to accept. "There's a million girls who look just like me."

Jordan cocked her head thoughtfully. "Maybe, but there's something about the way you animate yourself that makes you stand out from the crowd. In spite of everything you've been subjected to, there's a vitality and intelligence that shines out of your eyes that makes you different. Not to mention that you have the most amazing smile in all of human history. Just looking at you makes me weak in the knees."

Sarah hid her face in Jordan's shoulder. "You're embarrassing me."

Jordan cupped Sarah's head gently. "I'll try to keep it to a minimum, but sometimes I just have to say it or I'll bust."

Unable to think of anything to say, Sarah tightened her arms and heard Jordan sigh. It was hard sometimes to believe that Jordan really wanted to be with her like this. It was not something she had ever expected. Knowing how to accept the goodness of it was beyond her.

Jordan sighed again. "I should probably get going. I've got some things to take care of and I

know you need to study."

It hurt to let go, but Sarah forced herself to do it. Jordan's hands prevented her from moving away entirely and Sarah looked at the handsome woman to see what she wanted.

"May I have a kiss before I go?"

Leaning closer felt awkward until their lips touched. The rightness of it drew Sarah in and she forgot everything else. She always did. Uncertainty and insecurity plagued her frequently, but when she was touching and kissing Jordan, everything made sense. Sarah ended the kiss with a caress of her hand on the angled features and smiled. "When will I see you again?"

"When do you *want* to see me again?"

"Well," she began bashfully, "I'll be home by 4:30 tomorrow."

Jordan gave her a quirky grin. "Then I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Sarah gave her another kiss and let her go. She put the chess set away in the closet and got her books out, but she just couldn't concentrate on her studies. There wasn't anything on television that grabbed her. She wandered from room to room for a bit and then decided it might be time to read the books Maggie had given her about the BDSM lifestyle. The four slim paperbacks had been hidden under her mattress since she'd gotten them. Sarah dug them out and sat down on the bed. Maybe it was about time she learned a little about what Jordan did in the dungeon. It was part of who Jordan was and not something Sarah could hide from for much longer.

Tossing pillows against the head of the bed, she settled back to read.

~***~

Sarah was up well before dawn on Saturday. The wind was howling outside and she dressed warmly for the trek up to the big house. It was time to go back to work and she was actually looking forward to being back in the dungeon. Reading the BDSM books had been a real eye-opener for her. Without ever really being conscious of it, she had believed that the dungeon was all about torment and despair and degradation. It just wasn't true. Oh, it *could* be, if that was what the players mutually agreed on, but it was really all just an illusion. It was about living out your fantasies in safety.

What had surprised her the most was the idea that the submissive partner had the real control. You might *choose* to pretend that you didn't, but if you could say stop and expect to be obeyed, how much control had you really given up? It was an intriguing question.

The thing that made her most uncomfortable was that she was looking at her life differently now. Sarah's sexual history could very easily be seen within the BDSM context. Having sex with strangers with carefully delineated limits and expectations was very much like what the books described as playing. Sarah was both excited and disturbed by that comparison. She wanted very

much to talk to Jordan about it, but was afraid if she said it out loud, it would be true with no possibility of turning back. She didn't want to *find out* she was a player; she wanted a choice.

Sarah had it in her head that being in the dungeon might help her figure it out. It didn't seem an unreasonable idea. Except for the first couple of minutes she had been in the dungeon, she had always felt comfortable there. Now, with all of the new information she had, she wanted to know how the large room felt to her in context. Maybe she would find answers there.

The kitchen was dark and quiet. Even Maggie wasn't up yet. Sarah left her winter gear by the back door and made herself some instant coffee. Cradling the hot mug in chilled hands, she walked through the still house and up the stairs.

The dungeon was more disheveled than usual and the odor of sex was strong. An unfocused desire swept through her like a tornado. Sarah lifted a shaky hand and licked off the hot coffee that had spilled. She could not deny her excitement. She had often felt excited in this room and was only now able to admit it to herself. *Maybe it's true. Maybe this is part of me, too. It would certainly be convenient considering my feelings for Jordan, but is this really the kind of life I want? If it's part of me, do I have a choice? The books say I do, but they also say that it's not something a person can just give up. Oh God, I have so many questions.*

Sarah looked at everything with new eyes. The books had been quite specific about nearly everything. She looked at the different striking implements and knew which ones would sting and which ones would thud. The basket of used toys made her wonder about how those things would actually feel during use. She imagined herself bound on the different mounts and how her body would be used.

Part of her mind wanted to run away. It didn't want to consider such things. It was tempting to give into that feeling, but that wasn't how Sarah lived her life. She attacked things. She picked a goal and went after it with every part of herself. *If* BDSM was going to be a part of her life, she would commit to it with every resource. Sarah reminded herself that she didn't have to choose in that instant. She would be wise to learn more about the lifestyle and herself before she made that decision. For the moment, all she had to do was be aware of the possibility. With that thought firmly in the front of her mind, she went to work.

The more she cleaned, the more she saw that needed cleaning. From the look of things, it had been a free-for-all the night before. Every mount needed detailed attention. Sarah privately thanked Jordan for insisting on condoms. It would have been too disgusting otherwise. Sure, she found traces of sperm here and there (and that was disgusting enough), but by and large it was probably sweat, lube and the fluids of women.

She was halfway through the mounts and on the second dishwasher load of toys when Maggie came in and invited her down to breakfast. Glancing at a clock, Sarah realized she'd already been at it for a bit more than four hours. She *was* hungry. Washing up, she hurried downstairs.

Maggie had a king's feast laid out: bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs, hash browns, French toast, biscuits and gravy. It smelled wonderful. "Who else is coming for breakfast?"

"Just the three of us. Coffee?"

"Sure. This is a lot of food, Maggie."

"You need your strength, dear. I can't believe you're back to work so soon after that horrible accident. I just don't know what the Master is thinking."

Sarah reached out for a sausage link and bit into it. "I got a doctor's note. I'm fine now. This is really good."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Maggie admonished. "Get a plate, dear. If you eat over the sink, you'll get fat."

Sarah grinned. It sounded just like something a real grandmother would say. "Yes, ma'am."

Jordan came in as Sarah loaded up a plate. Half awake, her hair was tousled and little pink panthers frolicked over her pajamas. Smiling ear to ear, Sarah said, "Good morning."

"Unh. Coffee."

Sarah waited until Jordan had taken a sip of the mug Maggie gave her. She had never seen Jordan like this before and she couldn't help wanting to tease her. "Rough night?"

"You've no idea."

"Love the 'jammies."

Jordan glanced down at herself and then fixed Sarah with a sinister glare. "If you tell anyone, you're fired."

"Grump."

"Brat."

"Grouch."

"Wench."

"Enough," Maggie barked, not unkindly. "Eat. I didn't go to all this work just to have a cat fight in the middle of it."

Sarah shared a look of amusement with her employer and dug into her eggs. She couldn't help watching Jordan out of the corner of her eye. She was just so sexy like this. Kind of vulnerable and defenseless, without being any less imposing and powerful. Part of it was that she had come to breakfast as a woman, probably for the first time in years. A lot of it was that Sarah had never

seen her less than fully dressed. The hair was a nice touch, too. The way it went every which way made her want to run her hands through it. Of course, she felt like that a lot lately, but the feeling was stronger now. Maybe it was because Maggie was right there and there was nothing Sarah could do to satisfy that itch.

Jordan was on her second cup of coffee and her third slice of French toast when she broke the silence. "The dungeon is a mess today, Sarah. I'll give you a hand with it."

"I'm actually about half done. I got an early start."

Jordan nodded in surprise and rubbed at one eye. "I should have warned you. Every time I close the house and then open it back up, it's like they all go nuts. I had to throw five people out for misbehaving."

"Was anyone hurt?" Maggie asked.

"No. I would never let it get that bad. Two of them showed up drunk and I sent them packing right away. The other three were just insensitive."

"They take you for granted," Maggie said tightly. "You give them so much and they forget that you don't have to. I still say you should make them pay to come."

"You know I can't do that. The minute one penny changes hands, I'm in business and subject to all kinds of laws prohibiting such behavior. They couldn't do a tenth of what they do if I open that door."

Sarah was watching the conversation avidly. This was the first time since she'd been hired that Jordan had talked about what went on upstairs.

"It's not right," Maggie insisted.

"Maybe not, but I don't see any reasonable alternatives."

"You should be more selective."

"I am. I already interview every prospective player and they have to have a sponsor."

"That's not what I mean. Maybe you should make playing by invitation only. You shouldn't let them just wander in whenever they feel like it. It's *your* house, *your* dungeon. They have too much control and they don't appreciate you."

"Some of them do."

"Then let *them* play here. Send the others packing."

Sarah got an idea and blurted it out. "What if they didn't pay you with money?" Both women

looked at her as if just remembering she was there.

"Any type of barter or trade would be considered income," Jordan explained.

"Only if you're the one profiting from it."

Jordan looked interested. "What do you have in mind?"

"Community service." Sarah could see that she had their attention. "What if you required every player to contribute ten hours a month to whatever community service interests them in order to be considered for playing upstairs? Not only would it make the community a better place to live, they wouldn't be able to take playing here for granted. They would have to think about meeting their obligations before they could avail themselves of your generosity."

Maggie smiled immodestly. "She's a genius."

Jordan was rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "You may have something there, Sarah. Remember how excited they were about the blood drive the other night? And I couldn't believe how they jumped on the Fireman's Fund thing. Maybe they're *wanting* more organization and structure as a group."

A warm glow of pride spread throughout her body. "How much did they donate?"

Jordan shrugged. "I had to write a check for just over sixty thousand."

Her mouth felt right open. "*Are you serious?*"

Jordan grinned. "That's what I said."

"*Holy crap.*"

"I think I said that, too."

"You know," Maggie interjected, "maybe what you need to do is set up some kind of organization like the Elks or the Lions. Not a legal one with charters and non-profit status, of course. I doubt you could get recognition for that, but something along those lines might be a good idea. The players could have a hand in deciding what community projects the group would endorse."

Sarah put aside the Fireman's Fund for the moment and considered it. "If they worked together on projects, you'd have a better idea of who was actually meeting their obligations. Keeping track of what they did on their own might be difficult."

"I see yard sales, car washes and bake sales," Maggie said with enthusiasm. "Or helping families whose homes have burned down. There's a million things that could be done. I may not want be one of your players, Jordan, but I'd be interested in being a part of that."

"So would I," Sarah chimed in.

Jordan put her hands up. "Sounds like we have a consensus. I'll run it by a few players and see what they think. It'll take some work, but it certainly sounds plausible."

Sarah had another burst of creativity. "You could call it the Beaver Lodge."

For one brief moment, all was still, and then they were shrieking with uncontrollable laughter.

~***~

She was nearly done vacuuming when Jordan came in wearing black leather pants and a blue Polo shirt. Sarah turned the machine off. "Hey."

"When you're done, could I see you in my office? There's something I want to show you."

"Sure. It'll be about ten minutes."

"Take your time. I'll wait."

She finished cleaning while trying to imagine what it could be. It was probably something to do with what they had talked about over breakfast. Sarah stopped for a final look at the dungeon. She felt good about the job she had done. If she had reason to think that a criminal forensics team was coming in, she had confidence that they would find very little. It gave her a good feeling.

The door to Jordan's office was open and she stepped inside expectantly. "Here I am."

Jordan smiled. "Right on time. Close the door." Sarah shut the door as Jordan stood up from her leather chair. "Come sit down for a second."

The whole scene seemed a little strange, but Sarah obeyed. "Now what?"

"Reach under the desk on the left side." She put her finger on the blotter. "Right about there."

Sarah put her hand up under the desk and felt around. Her fingers slipped over a protrusion. "What is it?"

"Push it and hold it for a few seconds."

After a few moments, Sarah heard the office door lock on its own and then there was a mechanical sound to her right. Turning her head, she saw a bookcase recede into the wall and then slide to one side.

"That'll do it," Jordan said. "You can let it go now."

Sarah stood up in awe of the mystery. "What is it?"

"My room. Come on."

"Cool." Sarah followed Jordan into the opening and down a stairway. At the bottom of the stairs, Jordan pushed a button on the wall and the bookcase quietly moved back into place above them. "Very cool," Sarah said approvingly.

Jordan smiled and opened the door.

Except for the lack of windows, it could have been any middle class living room. It was a little larger and the furniture was worn, but it seemed pretty normal. Except for the sofa. It was the ugliest combination of orange, green and yellow Sarah had ever seen, not to mention that it was probably older than she was.

"Feel free to look around. I've been cleaning it up for the better part of a week, but don't judge me by those efforts. I'm much better at other things."

Sarah grinned at Jordan. "So I've noticed."

Jordan raised an eyebrow playfully and pointed off to her right. "The kitchen is through there. Down that hallway are the bedroom, bathroom, library, exercise room and my real office."

"Your *real* office?"

"Upstairs is for show. I do my real work down here."

Sarah looked around, trying to capture details. "Is it okay now to ask what your real work is?"

"I'm a writer."

That got her attention. "Really? What do you write?"

Jordan took a deep breath, folded her arms and dug one toe into the worn carpet. "Do you remember that day you were reading in the gazebo and I brought you lemonade?"

The memory came back to her clearly. "Yes."

Another deep breath. "I wrote that."

Sarah's mind blanked for a moment. "*You* are Trey Halvorsen?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I can easily prove it."

Her hand flew to her mouth in horror.

"What is it?" Jordan asked with concern.

"I called it trash," she whispered through her fingers.

Jordan laughed comfortably. "As I recall, you said it was *fun* trash. You also said I didn't let you take much for granted and my imagery was good. All in all, it was the best review I've ever had. Certainly, it was the most honest. For that, I thank you."

Sarah felt sick to her stomach. "You're thanking me for calling what you do trash?"

"It *is* trash, Sarah. We both know it. I sit down here writing unrealistic romances for lonely straight women. There's nothing noble or glamorous about it." Jordan ran a hand through her hair as if searching for the right thing to say. "It doesn't really mean anything, Sarah. I'm exactly the same person you knew a couple of minutes ago. It's not like I'm famous. Sure, Trey Halvorsen is well known in a who-is-she kind of way, but I'm not. *Don't* let this intimidate you. *Don't* disappoint me."

The words were a definite command, harsh and decisive, but the pleading of Jordan's eyes said something else all together. She looked scared. Sarah stepped back mentally. Jordan *was* the same person. The only thing that was different was Sarah's perception of her.

An incident of several years before went through Sarah's mind. There had been a girl in her dorm that she had started to become close to. It was her first real exposure to the idea of having a friend. They were getting along quite well and then the girl found out that Sarah was a lesbian. She had been completely unable to handle it and had transferred to another dorm to get away from her. Sarah clearly remembered arguing that she was the same person she had been all along. It was the same thing Jordan had just said to her. Was it true? She supposed it was, but the fact remained that her perceptions *were* different now. Was it fair? Probably not. Did she want to be like the girl she had known so briefly?

Sarah wasted a moment trying to remember the name of that girl. It wouldn't come and she supposed it didn't really matter anymore. So what if Jordan was an accomplished writer? Trey Halvorsen had an impressive list of novels to her credit, but she was no Danielle Steel. Hollywood wasn't making the books into movies and fans weren't camping at the gates. Jordan was just Jordan. True, she was wealthy and powerful, but she was just as neurotic and odd as everyone else in the world. The only real difference between Sarah and Jordan was that Jordan had lived longer. She'd had more time to achieve the things she'd done. It was impossible to say whether or not Sarah would do as well financially given the same amount of time to work with, but that didn't necessarily mean she wouldn't be a success.

"Please, Sarah. Don't let this ruin how you are with me."

Looking into the dark blue eyes, Sarah saw a childlike fear of rejection. It was so unlike Jordan to be so vulnerable and all she could think of was easing that fear. Taking two steps, she reached for Jordan's hand. "I have to say this one thing, Jordan."

The tall woman seemed to brace herself mentally. "Yes?"

Sarah gazed deeply into her eyes and said, "That is the ugliest piece of shit couch I've ever seen."

Jordan blinked and the fear was gone. She frowned. "You don't like my couch?"

"It's pathetic. I hope you don't think I'm going to let you snuggle me on that old thing. I'm surprised you don't have scabies from it."

A trace of a smile flitted over the handsome face. "Couches are heavy. I can't manage switching this one out by myself. It was already down here, so I left it."

"I'll help you move it."

Jordan reached out to capture Sarah's face and kissed her. "Thank you, little one."

She knew Jordan was thanking her for more than the offer of help. And, since reading the books, she knew that *little one* was a term of endearment from the dungeon. On impulse, she answered, "You're welcome, Master."

Jordan hesitated, eyes searching, and then she smiled. "Shall we continue the tour?"

The exercise room contained a treadmill, a work out machine she'd seen on infomercials and a poster of Xena, Warrior Princess. Sarah looked at Jordan askance and got an embarrassed shrug. She didn't say a word.

The office had clearly been straightened up, but it was still cluttered. Old fashioned maps of coastlines and islands covered the walls. She supposed that Jordan used them to chart the travels of her characters. Eleven first edition Trey Halvorsen books were lined up on a shelf and Sarah hid her insecurity. There were authors who spent their whole lives trying to get *one* book published and Jordan had eleven. It was hard not to be intimidated by that.

The library was interesting. Half of it was resource material for Jordan's writing. Focusing on the 16th to 19th centuries, the subjects covered every aspect of life that Sarah could imagine: animal husbandry, crafts, cooking, politics, weaving, medicine, coinage, religion, slavery, ship-building, education, metallurgy, farming, fashion, biographies, law, navigation, philosophy. For the first time, Sarah saw beyond the image of the writer and saw how much work went into crafting a book. It really was work.

The rest of the library was devoted to the BDSM lifestyle. It was a surprise to Sarah that there were so many books on the subject. Maybe that was naive, but it still shocked her. Jordan had the books divided into fiction, non-fiction and technique. Sarah wanted to sit down and read it all. Seeing all of the books, however, gave her the courage to open the subject to discussion.

"I have a tiny confession to make," she began.

Jordan cocked her head.

Nervous, Sarah put her hands behind her back and twisted them together. "Do you remember when Maggie first came here? You gave her some books to read about upstairs?"

"I remember. How do you know about that?"

"Well, she gave them to me and I read them."

Jordan grew quite serious. "Why did she give them to you?"

Sarah looked away. "I was . . . curious."

"You could have come to me, Sarah."

"I know, but . . . at the time, well, it just sort of came up. I wasn't asking her about it really. It was before Christmas break. I only just read them last Tuesday."

"Are you all right?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I *want* to talk about it, but I don't."

"I understand."

Sarah felt a little desperate as she looked at Jordan. "Do you?"

Jordan smiled gently. "Believe me, I do. When you're ready to talk about it, I'll tell you anything you want to know. But, I want you to understand one thing. It's very important. You don't have to be a player to be with me. It's not a requirement. I applaud your curiosity. Few people have the courage it takes to even read about the lifestyle, but I have no expectations of you in that regard. None at all. Do you hear what I am saying?"

Sarah bit her lip. "But, what if it turns out that I'm . . . that I . . . ?"

"We'll deal with that if it happens," Jordan said with a shrug. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

"Are you just trying to be supportive or do you really mean that?"

Jordan grinned. "Both?"

The attempt at humor eased Sarah's nerves. "Well, then, can you recommend another book I should read?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

Jordan turned to the books and looked rapidly through the spines. Her long fingers pulled one free. "It's been a while since I gave Maggie those books. Was this one of them?"

Sarah looked at the cover. "No."

"When you're done with that one, let me know. As you can see, I can keep you busy reading for some time."

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

The tour ended in Jordan's bedroom. Sarah blinked twice. "Pink?"

"I like pink," Jordan said in a careful tone.

It was like being inside cotton candy. *Everything* was pink. The walls, the floor, the furniture, the bedspread. It was more pink than Sarah had ever seen in one place. It was almost psychotic in its pinkness. It was Barbie on steroids. It was all the Pepto-Bismol in the world. Sarah closed her eyes and the pinkness was burned on her retinas. "Jordan?"

"Don't say it."

"It's pink."

"I think we've established that."

Sarah opened her mouth to elaborate and was struck with an epiphany. "This is the only place you get to be a girl."

"You understand?"

Sarah slid her hand into Jordan's and laced their fingers together. "Yes."

"I hoped you would."

"Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

"You suck at decorating." She yelped in surprise as Jordan picked her up and tossed her on the wide bed. In the next instant, Jordan was leaning over her with a huge smile. Sarah's heart hammered wildly as their bodies came together and she ran her hands over the strong back. "Not the reaction I was expecting."

"Should I stop?"

The husky tone of Jordan's voice only drove her desire higher. "No." She gasped as a lean thigh fit itself against her groin. It was *not* supposed to feel that good. Propped up on her elbows, Jordan was watching her closely. Sarah felt naked and exposed.

"Let's fool around, little one. Let's make each other crazy."

"Oh, God."

Jordan's eyes burned with passion. "Say yes."

Sarah lifted her own leg into the vee of Jordan's thighs and was rewarded with a soft groan. It was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard. "Yes."

~***~

Over the next three weeks, Sarah was busier than she had ever been in her whole life. Every moment was taken up. School and studying took up the largest portion of her time. The study group over lunch on Fridays had taken on two more girls and was going well. Sarah still had a hard time participating in the social aspect of it though. Her personal life was not the sort of thing she could discuss with casual friends. She just didn't have a common frame of reference for talking with them. Still, it was nice to kind of feel like part of a group.

Sarah asked Jordan about bringing people over to her house for studying and Jordan had reassured her that it was fine. So far, Sarah had not wanted to cross that line with the girls. She considered it every Friday, but the moment never seemed right.

The absolute best parts of her life were when she was working in the dungeon and being with Jordan. Every day when she got home from school, Jordan was waiting on her couch. At first, Jordan had waited on the porch, but it was just so cold out that Sarah had insisted she go inside. Jordan very scrupulously only stayed for an hour so as not to interfere with her studies, but it was an hour filled with talking, kissing and snuggling. Sarah didn't understand why Jordan wasn't pressing for more, but she raced home every day to be with her.

Sunday's were developing into their date days. After working, Sarah went home to take a shower and Jordan would pick her up. So far, they had gone to a late lunch, seen a movie and played miniature golf. Jordan was a good date. She was protective and solicitous without being controlling or inflexible. The dates were *fun*. They laughed and talked and just enjoyed each other.

After reading another half dozen of Jordan's BDSM books, Sarah had stopped. They all pretty much said the same thing and she was letting all of the information percolate for a while. She still didn't have any concrete answers about her own nature, but the books had given her some fascinating insights into Jordan's character.

Jordan liked to be in charge and have control. Being in command made Jordan feel safe and relaxed. Sarah suspected that being dominant was how Jordan handled feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. It was a protective mechanism. Sarah had no problem understanding that. What the books made clear to her was that Jordan's dominance existed in conjunction with a submissive's *belief* in that dominance. Jordan needed positive reinforcement of her authority.

Sarah found herself wanting to provide that reinforcement, but she had few ideas on how to go about it without being obvious or foolish. One way she came up with was to stop arguing with Jordan over who paid for what on their dates. Jordan liked to pay for everything. When Sarah stopped insisting on paying her share, Jordan puffed up like a rooster. Sarah came to understand that Jordan's generosity wasn't about having more money. It made her feel good about herself. Sarah made a point of saying a genuine *Thank You* every time and it would invariably bring a beaming smile to Jordan's face. It didn't seem right to make someone feel good by letting them spend money, but Sarah was working on not feeling guilty about it.

Nothing was ever said, but Maggie knew about them. It was clear from the way she watched them. Sarah was glad she knew, but was grateful that Maggie was respecting their desire for privacy. She didn't think she could handle being teased about it. The feelings were too new and strong for teasing. It wouldn't be funny; it would just hurt.

Juggling her coat, sweater and backpack, Sarah left her first class on Wednesday only to find Jordan lounging against the wall in the hallway. It was very strange to see her out of context. Sarah stepped closer to get out of the way of students. "What are you doing here?"

"I missed you."

Her heart melted with the sweetness of it. "You did?"

"May I walk you to your next class?"

"It's not for two and a half hours."

Jordan smiled and reached for Sarah's pack. "Can I carry your books and keep you company?"

Sarah smiled as the pack was slung over one broad shoulder. "I have a better idea. I still have to buy a dress for Pete's wedding. Do you want to help me pick one out?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Their ideas of shopping were very different. Sarah was a perfect size four and left to her own devices, she would have taken a dress off the rack, trusting that it would fit. Jordan wanted to see her in everything. Sarah ended up in a dressing room in her underwear while Jordan brought her dresses to try on. She had to model each one. Jordan might not be any good at decorating a house, but she had a knack for clothes. Every time Sarah tried something on that she didn't like, Jordan would grimace. It was a relief to find their tastes so in sync.

Sarah wasn't sure about the slinky green dress that Jordan tossed over the dressing room door until it slithered over her hips. Not only did it feel good, it looked great. It left one shoulder bare and had a slanted hem that accented her legs nicely. Sarah resisted looking at the price tag and stepped out for Jordan's opinion.

Jordan's eyes widened and she tossed aside the dresses she had in her hand. "Wow."

Sarah blushed with pleasure. "I like it."

"Me, too. My God. You look fabulous."

Facing the mirror, Sarah caressed the fabric over her belly. "Is it wedding appropriate?"

"Oh, yeah. With the right shoes . . . *wow*."

Sarah took advantage of the fact that they had the dressing rooms to themselves. Feeling completely wanton, she sidled up to Jordan and ran her hands over the vested chest. It was a risqué move, but Jordan looked like a man and such a caress was quite commonplace among straight couples. "Do you think I'm sexy?"

Jordan gave her a breathless moan. "God, yes."

Sarah rubbed her hips against Jordan with an amorous purr. "Do you want me?"

Jordan's hands stayed at her sides, but her voice was a low growl, her eyes hard. "Be careful, little one. I'm already on the edge."

The power of Jordan's desire was breathtaking. Never had she seen such intensity and need directed at her. "You aren't alone," she whispered daringly. Hands slid over her hips as Jordan's mouth claimed her. There was a new ferocity in the kiss and Sarah welcomed it.

A throat cleared behind her and Sarah pulled back. "Oops."

"Go change," Jordan ordered softly.

Sarah couldn't look at the saleswoman as she ducked into the tiny room. She'd never been caught before and it was embarrassing. She changed quickly and put the green dress back on the hanger. Jordan was leaning against one wall with a smirk and the saleswoman looked on discouragingly. "I'm ready."

Jordan put an elbow out. "Shoes, My Lady?"

Sarah hid a grin. Looping her hand through Jordan's arm, she answered, "Yes, My Lord."

Proceeding to the shoe department, Jordan insisted on fitting Sarah herself. The large hands were

gentle and Sarah found the whole process very erotic. The heels that went with the dress were quite high, but Jordan's look of approval decided it for Sarah.

It came to nearly three hundred dollars at the register. In the not too distant past, it would have been impossible for Sarah to splurge so extravagantly, but now she had the means. It barely hurt at all.

"Your boyfriend is awfully sweet."

Sarah looked at the cashier in momentary confusion and then understood. She hadn't thought of Jordan that way before, but maybe she was her boyfriend. And her girlfriend, too. It was an exciting thought. "Yes, he is."

"It's easy to see that he's totally gone on you."

Sarah looked over at Jordan where she was looking at winter gloves. "I'm pretty gone on him, too."

"Doesn't hurt that he's so hot."

"No," she mused aloud, "it doesn't hurt a bit."

Once outside, Sarah had to share the exchange with Jordan. To her surprise, Jordan didn't think it was funny. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd be amused. I was."

"They think you're straight," Jordan said tightly.

"So?"

Jordan stopped. "Don't you get it? When you're out with me, it's not just me pretending. You have to pretend, too. Every time you go out with me, people will assume we're a straight couple. You can't be what you are when you're with me. I hate that."

"I don't."

"You should."

"But, I don't care what you are."

"That's easy to say when you know the truth."

Sarah got angry. "You're the one who doesn't get it, Jordan. I decided it didn't matter *before* I knew for certain. At this point, all I have is your word for what you really are. For all I know, you're waiting to take me to bed because you're worried my being a lesbian means that I won't like your penis."

"Keep your voice down," Jordan hissed.

Sarah wanted to shout, but Jordan was right. She stepped closer and spoke more softly, but kept the intensity of her anger. "I don't care what you really are. Do you hear me? *I don't care*. I get the best of both worlds with you. I get a strong, powerful man and a sensitive, gentle woman all wrapped up in one. I want you exactly the way you are, Jordan. I know you love being a woman, but you won't admit that you love being a man, too. Why can't you love being both? You're the best man I know. I want to be with the man you are just as much as I want to be with the woman."

"But, I'm not a man."

"Yes, you are."

"Sarah . . ."

"You're not listening to me."

"You're not making any sense."

"I don't have to make sense, damn it! I love you both!" Sarah clapped a hand to her mouth in horror.

"You love me?"

"I didn't say that."

Jordan was grinning. "You most certainly did."

Sarah hurried for the car as fast as the icy pavement would let her. "I have to get back to school. I don't want to be late for class."

"Sarah."

She had to get away and think. A hand grabbed her by the arm as she was slipping on the ice. Jordan stopped her fall and held her firmly by the arms. "Please, let me go."

"Hold on a second, Sarah. I don't want you to fall and get hurt."

"Take me back to school."

"I will. Just let me say one thing."

"No," she pleaded.

"I love you, too, Sarah."

"Don't say that."

"I love you."

It took a tremendous effort not to give into her panic. Sarah stood very still and tried to be calm. "Please take me back to school."

Jordan hesitated. "All right. I'm going to let go of you. Don't run. I don't want you to fall on the ice. We'll get in the car and I'll drive you back to school."

It was a tense, silent drive. Sarah kept her eyes out the side window, blind to anything but her pain. She'd been having such a good day and then she'd gone and ruined it. Why had she said that? Where had it come from? Shouldn't a person *know* they were in love before they blurted it out like that? How had this happened?

"Sarah?"

Jordan was pulling up to the curb and Sarah reached for the door latch. "Thank you for shopping with me."

"*Wait.*"

The command made her pause. "Please, Jordan. Just let me go."

"We need to talk."

"I don't want to talk right now."

"All right. I'll drop your dress and shoes off at your house. We can talk later."

Sarah forced herself to look at Jordan and hated herself for the confusion she saw in the blue eyes. "I need some time."

The rugged face went blank. "You want me to leave you alone?"

"Please?"

Jordan nodded slowly and faced forward. "You know how to find me when you're ready."

It hurt so bad to see the pain she was causing. Her natural instinct was to fix it, but she just couldn't. Sarah lifted her pack from the back seat and got out of the car. As Jordan drove away, Sarah started to cry.

~***~

Sarah pulled the pillow over her head to muffle the sound of knocking on her front door. She didn't want to see anyone. She just wanted to lie in bed until it stopped hurting. Sarah knew she should be studying, but she just didn't care anymore. Nothing mattered except this aching torment.

"Are you sick?"

Sarah cringed at the sound of Maggie's voice from the foot of her bed. "Go away."

"Answer me. Are you sick?"

"No." She felt Maggie's weight as she sat on the edge of the bed and allowed the pillow to be taken away. Fighting for it might hurt the old woman and she didn't want that.

"All right then. I want you to tell me what's gotten into the two of you. Neither of you are eating enough to keep a rat alive. Jordan hardly comes out at all and you're dragging around like you're on the edge of death. What's wrong?"

Sarah hadn't thought she had any tears left in her, but they came anyway. "I don't want to talk about it."

"What has the Master done?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

"Of course you are. You're lying in bed on a Sunday afternoon with tears in your eyes like you always do. Are you under the impression that I'm stupid? Something has happened and I'm not leaving you alone until you tell me what it is. You might as well tell me now because I'll nag you until you do. What's wrong?"

Sarah began to cry in earnest and she was taken into Maggie's embrace. She cried until she was sick. Maggie held her hair back while she dry heaved over the toilet and gave Sarah a cool wet cloth when it was over.

"This isn't good for you, dear. Whatever is eating you up inside has to come out or you *will* make yourself sick. Tell me what happened."

Sarah pressed the wet cloth against her face with shaky hands. "I'm so tired," she said weakly. "I just can't do this anymore."

"Back into bed, dear."

She had no choice but to let Maggie help her. She couldn't have done it on her own even if she wanted to. Once between the sheets, she heard Maggie in the kitchen and numbly listened to the sound of cupboard doors and the microwave. Never in her whole life had she felt so drained and helpless.

"Here's some broth, honey. You need something in your stomach. Being dehydrated will only make you feel worse."

The smell of the broth was tempting. Sarah was quickly propped up with pillows and she held the warm liquid under her nose. It tasted wonderful and the warmth was welcoming.

"Now," Maggie said as she sat down on the bed. "Tell me what's troubling you."

It was odd to feel like she was crying and yet have dry eyes. "I think I need to find another job."

Maggie frowned. "Why?"

Sarah put her head back and closed her eyes. "Because I'm in love with Jordan."

"Isn't he in love with you?"

Her throat was tight with grief. "That's the problem."

"Being in love is a problem? I don't understand, dear."

"I can't be in love, Maggie. Not now. Not with Jordan. I just can't."

"Why ever not? If he loves you and you love him, where's the problem?"

Afraid she was going to spill the broth, Sarah shakily moved it to the nightstand and collapsed into her pillows. "I'm not ready, Maggie. I don't know anything about how to love someone. I don't know if I can be what Jordan needs."

"Ah. You're worried about meeting his needs in the dungeon. Have you talked to him about that? Do you know what it is that he needs?"

"She doesn't need me there," Sarah admitted. "She's got all of the players to keep her satisfied."

"Oh, for God's sake," Maggie grumbled. "How could the two of you not have talked about this before now? Do you really not know what Jordan does up there?"

"It's none of my business," Sarah said sadly.

"Of course it is! You love him!"

The last thing she wanted to handle was Maggie angry. Sarah reached out to take her hand. "I can't ask her to give up her other lovers and I don't think I can share her. I've tried not to think about it and I never wanted to change her. Maybe I should just go while I still can."

"Let me get this straight. You want monogamy, but you don't think Jordan is capable of it and

you're afraid to ask for it. If I know you at all, you're still under the impression that you aren't good enough for Jordan under any circumstances. On top of that, you're scared to death that Jordan will want things of you in the dungeon that you just can't give. Is that all of it? Did I miss anything?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Maggie chuckled fondly and smoothed Sarah's hair from her face. "As a matter of fact, it's too much. You are laboring under some big misconceptions, dear. Most of what you're suffering from is either self-inflicted or the result of very poor communication. You really need to talk to Jordan. Nothing is as impossible as it seems."

"I can't talk to her right now."

"I've got something to say to you, and you'd better listen *real* hard. *You* are the only one who thinks you aren't good enough for Jordan. I've heard the logic and the excuses and it's all hogwash. Your fear isn't about the money or the dungeon or age. You're still listening to your parents. *Stop it*. Stop it right now. The two of you need each other. You gentle him and he strengthens you. I'm not saying there won't be problems and issues, but you can work them out together. You may never have another chance at the kind of love you offer each other. Don't throw it away over things that don't matter. If you've done your best and it just isn't working out, that's one thing, but to sabotage it before it begins is just stupid. You don't strike me as a stupid woman. *Talk* to him. Tell him everything you think and feel. Make him tell you everything in his heart. The way you feel right now, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

Sarah closed her eyes and began to drift. "I'm so tired."

"All right, dear. You get some sleep. This will all work out. You'll see."

It was an odd sort of sleep; hazy and unclear. She thought about getting up to turn off the television, but the drone of voices was rather familiar and somehow comforting. At one point, she was aware that someone was touching her hair. It felt really nice and she wanted to say thank you, but she just couldn't find the energy.

The weight of an arm across her middle finally roused her from the misty doze. She knew at once that it was Jordan and guilt prompted her to speak. "Oh, Jordan. I'm so sor . . ."

"*Don't*. Do not apologize to me, Sarah. You did *nothing* wrong. In fact, I should be the one apologizing to you."

Sarah went over the parking lot disaster in her mind. She turned under Jordan's arm so she could see her face. "For what?"

A smile of irony appeared briefly. "It took four days and Maggie reaming me but good to realize that I've done you a grave disservice. But first, how are you feeling? Maggie called and said you were sick."

"I just cried too much I think." Sarah frowned. "What do you mean about Maggie? What did she say to you?"

"In a nutshell? I'm a jackass. What did she say to you?"

Sarah was too happy to see Jordan to censor her words. "That I'm the only one who doesn't think I'm good enough for you. And something about being stupid, but I'm not sure if she meant that I was or wasn't. You aren't a jackass."

"Actually, I am. And you are."

Sarah pulled back in surprise. "I'm a jackass?"

Jordan smiled and pulled Sarah closer. "No. You're only one who thinks I deserve better than you."

Sarah doubted that sentiment, but she said nothing as Jordan rose up on an elbow to lean over her.

"I love you, Sarah Wylie."

Embarrassed, she looked away, but Jordan moved into her line of sight and she was captured by the intense blue eyes.

Jordan's voice was soft, but riveting. "There isn't room in me to feel anything else, little one. *I love you*. I am completely adrift within my love for you. I love everything about you. It is beyond my ability to imagine ever feeling even a fraction of what I feel for anyone else, even were I to live a thousand years. I love you."

Her instinct was to say something funny to ease the tension of the moment, but she couldn't think of a single thing to say. Jordan was *serious*. It took her a second to hear the words that came out of her mouth. "Why me?"

"I don't know, baby. I could write volumes on what I love *about* you, but why? I just don't know. All I know is that I do love you. Something in you touches me in a way I've never known before. It's not because you're so beautiful or smart or funny (though I love those things beyond measure). It just *is*. You don't have to be or do anything to deserve it. I love you precisely the way you are."

Sarah was afraid she was going to start crying again. Her fingers crept up to touch Jordan's perfect mouth and she felt the gentle kisses within her bones. "I'm not ready, Jordan."

"Well," Jordan remarked dryly, "if you think I'm going to let you go off and practice love with someone else, you can just forget it. We can learn together." She frowned abruptly. "By the way, just what is it you think I do upstairs?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I assume you play."

Jordan sighed. "I'm the Dungeon Master, little one. Do you remember from the books what it is that DM's do?"

Sarah thought for a moment and the information came to her. "They watch everyone to make sure they are safe?"

"Exactly."

It didn't make any sense. "You don't play?"

"No," Jordan said firmly.

"Then, you aren't a player?"

"I am, but I don't play in my dungeon." Jordan shifted on her elbow to get more comfortable and rubbed Sarah's arm. "I make the rounds and check on everyone. Every once in a while, someone will ask me to evaluate their technique with a tool or device, or give them advice on how to make a binding more effective or comfortable, but for the most part, I make sure no one is being harmed, either deliberately or accidentally. Part of my duties as DM require me to occasionally touch people in sexual ways, but it's really no more sexual than a gynecological exam to a gynecologist. I'm not a participant. I'm the host. I should have explained that to you a long time ago. I'm sorry I failed to do so."

Sarah felt a profound relief mingled with sadness at the loneliness of Jordan's life. "I thought you were playing up there."

"I admit that I often get excited by what I see, but I handle that on my own after the players are gone. The only playing I've done in my dungeon has been by myself."

"It sounds lonely," Sarah said quietly.

Jordan nodded thoughtfully. "It has been, yes. I want to talk to you about this in depth, but there are other things I don't want to forget to say. First of all, you were right about me. I've had a lot of time to think these last four interminable days. I do love being a man. I love it just as much as I love being a woman. Instead of embracing that about myself, I've been resenting it because I felt it kept anyone from really knowing me, which is really stupid because it was a choice I made consciously. I've justified that choice by saying that it made other people more comfortable with me. I've come to see that I used it to keep people away. I've used it to hide from the possibility of love. Better to be unknown and unloved than to risk heartache. And then you came into my life. Not only do you see past my defenses, you seem to enjoy them. You really *don't* care what I am, do you?"

"No," Sarah said softly. "Or maybe it's not that I don't care, but that I like how different you are."

You transcend gender and make it unimportant."

Jordan licked her lips and took a deep breath. "I want to be a man *for* you and a woman *with* you. Does that make sense?"

It sounded perfect. "Yes."

"And you're okay with me being so bizarre?"

Sarah couldn't help a smile. "It might creep me out if it were anyone else, but on you it works."

"Thank you." Jordan caressed Sarah's face and then laid back so they were face to face. "Can you tell me what happened the other day? How you were feeling?"

Sarah moved fully into Jordan's arms and laid her cheek against the smooth chest. "I think I scared myself. I didn't know I was going to say that. About . . . you know."

"That pesky four-letter L word."

"Yeah. I just couldn't talk about it then."

"All right. I understand."

The guilt was still there and Sarah had to do something to alleviate it. "I know I hurt you, Jordan. I could see it in your face."

"Don't, little one."

Sarah pulled back a little so she could look into Jordan's eyes. "I never intended to hurt you. Knowing that I did made me feel terrible, but all I could think of was getting away. I *had* to get away. I'm so sorry about that."

"Hush, baby. There's nothing to forgive. You had every right to ask for space and I handled it with pitiful grace. I'm the one who needs to apologize for letting you down. You always have the right to demand what you need to be healthy and happy. Always."

Sarah put her head back to Jordan's chest. "I didn't do so well this time, did I? I've missed you so much. I've been miserable."

"I've missed you, too, baby."

Jordan's hands were rubbing her back in long, slow strokes and it felt wonderful. Sarah twined a leg with Jordan's and held on. A single question burned until she had to ask it. "Am I your girlfriend?"

"Yes, baby."

It was a little frightening, but it felt good, too. "I've never been anybody's girlfriend before." Jordan began a rhythmic rocking motion with their bodies and Sarah relaxed completely. "How long until you have to go back to the house for the party?"

"I don't," Jordan answered. "I taped a sign to the front gate that it was cancelled."

"I don't have to work in the morning?"

"No."

"Thanks," she said gratefully.

"You're welcome."

Sarah's belly unexpectedly rumbled. "Sorry."

Jordan chuckled. "I think you're hungry."

"I am, but I don't want to move."

"How about I make us something to eat and you can stay right here?"

"I don't want you to move either," Sarah mumbled into her shirt. "I want to stay like this forever."

"So do I, baby, but we have to eat sometime. I'd rather do it now than have to get up in the middle of the night."

Sarah's heart beat faster and her skin prickled deliciously. "Are you going to sleep here?"

"Yes, I am."

The fact that Jordan was *telling* her instead of asking made her shiver with excitement. One thought jumped to the forefront. "I need to take a shower and brush my teeth."

Jordan chuckled. "All right, little one. You shower and I'll cook. Are you hungry for anything in particular?"

"Anything sounds fine."

Sarah tried to hurry, but she'd been somewhat careless in her hygiene the last few days. She *had* to shave her legs and armpits, and her hair really needed conditioning. She wanted to be *clean* for Jordan. Anticipation made her skin so sensitive it almost hurt. Her hands trembled as she brushed her teeth and blew her hair dry. Sarah hardly recognized herself in the mirror.

Wearing her robe, she stepped into the bedroom and halted. The living room coffee table was in her bedroom and was arranged with candles, soup in coffee mugs and grilled sandwiches. Jordan was a woman now, clad only in socks, boxers and her shirt. The sleeves were rolled up to reveal her forearms, but it was the long, lean legs that Sarah stared at. They went on for *days*. She wanted to start at Jordan's toes and work her way up.

"Food first," Jordan said in a husky voice. "Eat, before I forget myself completely."

Sarah now knew beyond a doubt that they were going to make love. The air hummed with tension and her stomach was tied in a knot. She couldn't possibly eat while she was this aroused. Reaching back, she turned off the bathroom light. The flicker of the candles was like a promise.

Sitting on pillows across from each other, Sarah forced herself to take a bite of the warm cheese sandwich. Hunger instantly overrode everything else. "Oh, my god. This is good." Jordan grinned and began to eat. Sarah could hardly eat fast enough. The tomato soup had a flavor she'd never noticed before. "This tastes different."

"Butter."

"You put butter in it?"

"Good, huh?"

"Delicious."

"Glad you like it."

Sarah reached for a second sandwich. "Do you like to cook?"

"Sometimes. I make a mean stroganoff."

"I love stroganoff."

Jordan wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Then I suggest that next Sunday, you come to my place for dinner and afterward we'll watch a movie in my theater. I have a nice selection of lesbian films and if we make out in the back row, the manager won't mind."

Sarah laughed. "I just bet he won't."

"He owes me a favor."

"I'll just bet he does."

"More soup?"

"Just a little, please."

Jordan finished eating first and left the bedroom. A few minutes later, music softly drifted into the room. It was a new age guitar CD that Sarah sometimes did her yoga to. Romance gently took center stage. Sarah put the rest of her sandwich down and carefully wiped her hands and mouth clean. Fear made her arousal quiver.

"Have you had enough to eat?"

Sarah looked up to see Jordan in the doorway, one hand unhurriedly unbuttoning the dark shirt. Her collarbones dissolved at the raw eroticism of it. "I'm a little scared."

Jordan moved closer and reached down for Sarah's hand. "Me, too, baby."

Sarah let herself be pulled to her feet and followed Jordan to the bed. The tall woman sat on the edge of it and guided Sarah between her knees. It felt strange to be taller and Sarah put her hands on Jordan's shoulders for balance. "Why are you scared?"

"I don't want to disappoint you. I want it to be perfect and I'm afraid that I won't be good enough for you."

Sarah's hands moved inside the collar of Jordan's shirt of their own volition. "That's how I feel." Warm, soft skin came alive under her fingers and Sarah sighed. "You're so soft."

"Kiss me, baby."

Kissing made the fear go away. It made vulnerability desirable and desire an aching torment. Sarah hardly noticed when her robe was opened. She was already as naked as it was possible to be. There was something graceful about the slowness with which Jordan slid her robe off and Sarah shuddered.

"It's okay, little one," Jordan whispered into her mouth.

Sarah could hardly breathe as strong hands began to gently explore her. Up her legs to cup her backside; feather touches in the small of her back; a slow caress over her belly; fanning out over her shoulder blades; sliding over her shoulders to gently cradle her breasts. Sarah was usually quiet during sex, but she moaned as Jordan's thumbs brushed her nipples and unhinged her knees. "I need to lay down."

"Not yet, baby."

Not one to give up easily, Sarah opted to sit. Kneeling on either side of Jordan's hips, she sat on the long legs and tried to ignore the electric touch on her breasts as her hands pushed the cotton shirt over Jordan's shoulders. She was not at all disappointed in what she revealed. Jordan's breasts were smaller than her own, but they had a nice full shape and the erect nipples were more brown than pink. She could almost taste them. "Beautiful," she said reverently.

Jordan's hands lowered to Sarah's hips and pulled her closer, her mouth recapturing Sarah's in a hungry kiss. The feel of skin on skin was almost unbearable. Sarah wrapped her arms around the broad shoulders and pressed herself into the silken warmth. Nothing had ever felt quite like this.

Distracted by the delicious mouth claiming her own, Sarah wasn't aware that she was being moved until she found herself on her back. Jordan pulled away from their kiss and brushed Sarah's hair from her face.

"If there's anything you don't want, don't be afraid to tell me. I'll stop if you ask me to."

Sarah ran her fingers through the dark hair above her. "I don't want you to stop."

"If you change your mind..."

Smiling, Sarah ran her fingertips over Jordan's full lips. They begged for more kisses. "Come here."

Kissing Jordan always made her feel a bit delirious. The feel of Jordan's soft skin along her length made it even more intense. Sarah couldn't get enough. Her hands stroked, pulled and kneaded everything she could reach as she licked and sucked at Jordan's mouth. The need for air became secondary to her need to crawl inside of Jordan and become a part of her.

Sarah groaned in protest as Jordan's mouth left hers. She groaned again as Jordan kissed down her throat. It felt like butterfly kisses and made her shiver from the inside out.

"Relax, baby. This is going to take a while."

"No, now. I want you."

Jordan chuckled deep in her throat and continued her torturous pace. It was driving Sarah mad. Her nipples were so hard they felt like they would shatter and Jordan was kissing *around* them. Sarah shifted her breast to Jordan's mouth only to have Jordan move away.

"Jordan...I need you."

"I know."

"Please?"

Jordan lifted her head, fingers softly teasing the undersides of Sarah's breasts. "Are you even aware of how perfect you are?"

The husky depth of Jordan's voice gave her goosebumps.

"Let me love you, baby. Let me show you how you make me feel."

Sarah melted at the love she saw shining in her lover's eyes. "If this is how I make you feel, it's a wonder you haven't gone mad."

Jordan smiled. "Just relax, little one. Feel me."

Sarah closed her eyes and reveled in sensation. Gentle fingers stroked, teased and tickled her in places she'd never noticed before. Fingers were followed by hot kisses and tender bites. The inside of her elbows, the back of her knees, the center of her back, behind her ears, the back of her neck; Jordan brought them to life for her.

By the time Jordan's lips found her nipples, Sarah was awash in ecstasy. She clutched at the dark head, curling around it as icy fire streamed through her body. "Oh God, yes. A little harder...oooooh."

To Sarah's delight, Jordan loved her breasts and nipples until it felt like she was going to come. Her entire body was tense and trembling. "Please, Jordan...oh God. Please."

"Anything, baby."

Sarah watched as Jordan kissed down her belly, breathless with need. She laid her head back and prepared herself for the first touch of Jordan's mouth on her sex. To her surprise, she felt a brief kiss on her furred lips and then Jordan was beside her. Sarah surprised herself with a shuddering moan as Jordan's large hand slid between her legs.

"Is this what you want?"

Sarah nodded desperately.

"Open up for me, baby. Give me some room to play."

Sarah threw one leg over Jordan's hip, letting the other fall wide. Long fingers slid over her clit and Sarah rose to them.

"That's it, baby," Jordan crooned. "You feel so good. So wet and hot. Is this for me?"

Sarah could hardly breathe. Talking was out of the question. Threading her fingers through Jordan's hair, she opened her eyes to her lover, hoping that Jordan would see how strong her feelings were.

Jordan hummed, a smile resting on her lips. "I love your clitoris. I can feel her, rising to me, hard and slick. Is this what you like?"

Sarah rocked her hips against the maddening touch. She wanted to come and she wanted it to never end. Sarah held on as a single finger slipped inside of her, curled up behind her clit, then pulled out to stroke the sensitive tip.

She could feel her orgasm coming and she gasped for air.

"Let go, baby. I'm right here. I've got you. So beautiful..."

Sarah squeezed her thighs together, trapping Jordan's hand as she shuddered to a warm and comforting release.

It was not the most powerful or most intense orgasm she had ever experienced, but it was the only one to ever bring Sarah to tears. No one had ever taken so much time giving her pleasure or looked at her with such love as she dissolved into bliss. She cried for a few minutes within the circle of Jordan's strong arms.

"Thank you," Jordan purred.

"I think I should be thanking you. You're going to get pretty tired of me crying on you."

"Not when it's the result of making love, little one. It's the greatest compliment of all. You're so responsive. I loved how you were and how soft you are now. You're so incredibly lovely."

Needing a moment to recover, Sarah curled into the safety of Jordan's chest. "It's like you knew how to touch me."

"You made it easy, baby. Your breath, the little sounds you made, your hands; I just listened to your responses. They told me what to do."

She knew what Jordan was saying. It was something she had done herself. She just hadn't known that she was so easy to read. There was one thing she wasn't sure about though. "When you started to go down on me, why did you stop?"

"You started to tense up. I got the impression that you don't like that. Was I wrong?"

This was Sarah's shameful secret; the one she had never shared with another lover. It felt okay to tell Jordan about it now. "I *want* to like it, but I never do. I like doing it, but it doesn't work for me."

"Can you tell me why?"

Sarah took a deep breath. "It hurts."

"Ah. Lesbian myth number one strikes again."

Sarah lay back so she was face to face with Jordan. "What is it?"

Jordan's smile was tender. "That lesbians automatically know how to do cunnilingus. That it's somehow second nature to us. It is so not true."

"Do you know how?"

"I've done it, but I don't instinctively know how *your* body likes it. Everyone is different. It sounds to me like you might need a slower approach and a gentler touch. Someday, if you want to experiment, I'd be happy to work with you on it. I take instruction very well and I promise it won't bruise my ego if you hate it. But, if you don't want to try it, that's okay, too."

Reassured, Sarah could clearly see that Jordan was aroused. Slipping a thigh between the long legs, she smiled at the hitch in Jordan's breathing. Maybe now she would finally get a chance to do some exploring of her own. All of her previous attempts had been subverted. "Do you like having it done to you?"

"Very much," Jordan moaned as her hips began to gently rock.

Sarah was enjoying the moment. "And how do you like it?"

"I like to be sucked. Soft at first, then harder. And licking the tip."

She was surprised to be receiving such explicit instructions. It was nice to know right from the start what would please her lover. Sarah tentatively pushed at Jordan's shoulder to lay her back on the bed and was pleased that there was no resistance. Running her fingertips over a dark nipple, she was rewarded with a breathless moan.

"I like that," Jordan whispered, her eyes dark with desire.

Smiling, Sarah began tracing circles on the pale flesh. Jordan was watching her raptly. "Maybe I'll take my time with you. Like you did with me."

"I'm all yours, baby."

Sarah took Jordan at her word. The wonder of having Jordan open and naked to her touch consumed her. Jordan was responsive to her like no one had ever been. She was very verbal about what she liked, offering suggestions and praise equally. Jordan guided Sarah's lovemaking freely with her hands, her voice and her body. Sarah felt like she was losing herself in the journey. The pleasure she gave came back to her with shocking intensity. She could not have said who was experiencing the greater pleasure. When she finally settled between Jordan's long legs with her mouth, it was like coming home. The taste, the texture, the sounds Jordan was making; it had been years since she had done this without a latex barrier and it completely overwhelmed her. Jordan's orgasm took Sarah along for the ride.

"Stop, baby, stop."

Spent, Sarah lay her head on one quivering thigh. Never had she felt so much a part of someone. Giving pleasure had never made her come before. Sarah placed her hand over the thick curls and could feel the spasms continuing in the hot flesh. "That was amazing."

"Oh, God," Jordan panted. "Come up here, little one. I need to hold you."

It took an effort she didn't think she had to spare, but Sarah wormed her way into Jordan's embrace. They held each other tightly, only gradually relaxing.

"I didn't expect that," Jordan finally said. "You wiped me out."

Sarah smiled proudly. "Not for good, I hope."

Jordan chuckled warmly. "Almost. You have the sweetest mouth. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Her smile faltered as she remembered. "I'm usually getting dressed by now. If they thought so, I wasn't there to hear it."

"Good."

"What?"

"I'm glad you weren't like this with anyone else. None of them had with you what I'm feeling right now."

Sarah pushed herself up on an elbow and stared down at Jordan. "Does it bother you that I was with so many women?"

"No. I've been with quite a few myself."

It looked like Jordan was telling the truth and it pulled honesty from deep within Sarah. "It bothers *me*. It seems so . . . indiscriminate."

"A lot of my past feels the same way to me. I'm not proud of it. But, I'm proud of this. Of us. It's a start."

Sarah put her hand to Jordan's face in a slow caress. "You are so beautiful."

"I'm glad you think so."

Sarah laid her head down on Jordan's shoulder. "I've always thought so. From the very first moment we met. I sure never thought we'd ever be like this though. Did you?"

"Not consciously, no." Jordan's arms tightened for a moment and then her hands began to stroke Sarah's back. "You know what surprised me? You're a virgin."

"No, I'm not."

"You've never been with a man."

"True," she conceded.

"I like that. I like it a lot."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe I feel like you're somehow cleaner. More pure."

Sarah rolled her eyes privately. "Have you been with a man?"

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

Jordan was silent for nearly a minute. "It usually made me feel superfluous. I'm not talking strictly about the act, but the attitude with which it is done. Even when they tried to focus on giving me pleasure, it was for their own purposes. Men don't just give pleasure. They take it at the same time. The glut of medications on the market for impotency prove that a man won't give pleasure unless there's pleasure in it for him. I didn't like feeling like my ultimate function was to be used like that. Besides which, they smell funny, their skin is too hard and they can't kiss for shit."

Sarah laughed. "I just can't picture you with a man."

"It wasn't pretty. Have you ever been tempted?"

"Only by you." Jordan's caresses hesitated briefly and then continued. Sarah waited for a verbal response that didn't come. Gathering her courage, she added, "I think about it a lot. What it would feel like with you. To have you inside of me like that."

Jordan smoothly rolled Sarah to her back and looked at her through serious eyes. Her mouth opened, closed, and opened again. "Taking your virginity...I don't know if I could do it."

Sarah spread her legs and shifted Jordan between them. Lifting her hips with a hiss of enjoyment, she whispered, "Even if I begged you to?"

Jordan responded immediately, pushing back into Sarah. She nodded slowly, her breath deepening. "I'll think about it."

Sarah arched her back into the body that hovered over her. Desire swarmed under her skin like bees on a hot summer's day. Pulling her knees up, she wrapped her legs around the slender waist. "Make me come, Jordan."

The powerful woman took her with a growl.

~***~

Sarah raced home from school on Monday, straight into Jordan's arms. "It's a good thing I recorded my lectures," she said after they made love. "All I thought about all day was you. I don't remember anything."

Jordan smiled lazily, her hand tracing random designs on Sarah's belly. "I took a shower. That was about it."

"Is it supposed to be like this? Feeling like I can't ever get enough of you?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"It's hard to say. Months or years at least."

Sarah pulled Jordan's leg into her center with a satisfied groan. "I'm going to flunk out of school. I just know it."

Jordan propped her head on her hand. "No, you won't. I won't let you."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "You won't *let* me?"

Grinning, Jordan twiddled an imaginary moustache. "I *am* the Master, you know. I have ways of making you study."

"Oh, I can't wait to hear this. What's this brilliant plan of yours?"

"If you don't study, I'll spank you."

Stunned, Sarah sat up and pushed Jordan's leg off of her. "You wouldn't dare."

Jordan lay back on the bed and put her hands behind her head. "Relax, baby. I was just kidding."

"It wasn't funny."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I would never spank you as a punishment."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded indignantly.

"Spanking should be a reward. If it's given in response to bad behavior, it's just thinly veiled violence. Most tops would disagree with me, but that's how I feel about it."

Sarah's outrage took a back seat to her curiosity. "How do you handle bad behavior then?"

"Meaningless chores. Writing sentences. Time outs. Worst case scenario, the cold shoulder. Giving any sort of attention to a misbehaving submissive is a slippery slope. I prefer instead to consistently reward good behavior. I can do the 'you've been a very bad girl' routine in a scene of limited duration, but it's not really my style."

Sarah crossed her legs and pulled a corner of the sheet over her lap. "Do you think of me as your submissive?"

"I would hardly call you submissive," Jordan said with a smile. "Deliciously yielding, at times, yes, but not submissive."

Lowering her eyes, she picked at the edge of the sheet. "Do you wish I was more submissive?"

"Not particularly. There are moments with you when I can feel you surrendering control to me. Those moments are doubly precious because of their rarity and they fulfill my needs in that area. As exciting as those moments are to me, I prefer you strong and feisty."

Propping her elbows on her knees, Sarah put her chin in her hands. "I figured you for the type that would want a slave."

Jordan sighed comfortably. "I admit that the idea holds some appeal for me, but I'd much rather have a woman who calls me a dope and a pig. When a woman like that temporarily surrenders even a little bit of her power into my keeping, it's a beautiful thing."

"Is it enough for you?"

"It's more than I had reason to hope for, baby."

Sarah dropped one hand to Jordan's thigh. It was easier to talk when she was touching her. "I read those books. They said that playing wasn't something you could give up. I worry that you're giving up too much for me."

Jordan reached down with one hand to lace fingers with Sarah. "I gave most of it up a long time ago, Sarah. You aren't taking me away from anything. You're giving me my dreams. Please don't worry that you aren't giving me what I need. It's just not true."

Sarah couldn't quite accept that as final. "You wouldn't have the dungeon if you didn't have needs centered around it."

"Are you asking if I want to play with you there?"

"Maybe I am."

"What if I said I did? How would you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I guess it would depend on what you wanted to do there."

Jordan sat up and crossed her legs so they were knee to knee. "There's a huge difference between fantasy and reality. You can have fantasies that give you a lot of satisfaction and never want to live them out. Do I have fantasies of you and I in the dungeon? Of course I do. They're fun to think about, but I don't have to do them to enjoy the fantasy. Maybe, if I'm very lucky, we'll eventually live out a few of those fantasies in private, but I don't require an audience for them. The intensity of what I feel with you would make me feel more vulnerable in front of the players than I think I want to endure. I trust *you* with my heart, but I don't want to put it on display. However, just because we may not play at one of the parties, doesn't mean that we can't enjoy them together. Do you have any desire at all just to *watch* one of the parties?"

"You would let me do that?"

Jordan nodded. "I would love to have you with me at a party. There's usually dancing, you know. We'd have to get you set up with some sort of costume, but you might really like it."

"What kind of things can I expect to see?"

"I can pretty much guarantee that someone will be having sex. Maybe even several couples. You can watch or not. Partial and even complete nudity is a given. Odds are good that someone will get spanked before the night is over, but only if the sub requested it earlier. You might even get to see some slaves."

Sarah took a deep breath. "I have a couple of concerns."

"Okay. Let's talk about them."

"Mostly I'm afraid that someone will touch me or ask me to play with them."

Jordan shook her head in denial. "It won't happen. *No one* will try to touch you without your express verbal consent. As for asking you to play, that won't happen if I keep you close to me. The players will automatically assume that you belong to me for the night. Dungeon etiquette is such that any inquiries about you will have to go through me. It would be an affront for one of them to speak to you without my permission. You would not even have to act particularly submissive for the courtesy to stand. And if you want to join in a conversation, I'll just smile and they'll think I'm indulging you."

That didn't sound so bad to her. "The other thing is that don't most of them sort of know who I am? What are they going to think if you show up with the cleaning girl?"

Jordan smiled with wry amusement. "It would probably make my reputation for the next year."

"Be serious. What will they think? Will it cause problems for you?"

Jordan shrugged. "I would imagine surprise would be the main thing. They'll be very curious about you. After all, I've been the reclusive, celibate bachelor all the time they've known me. I

expect that by dawn the next day, *all* of the players will be talking about it."

"What will they say?"

"If they know what's good for them, they'll be happy for me. Better yet, they won't say anything at all. Ultimately, I don't care. The only opinion I care about is yours. Are you seriously considering coming to a party?"

Sarah bit her lip uneasily. "Yes."

"Is it to watch me or is there another reason?"

She felt almost sick with nerves. "Maggie said I should tell you everything I think and feel."

"You must know that I want to hear anything you've a mind to say."

"I'm kind of afraid to hear myself say it."

"Come here, baby." Jordan pulled Sarah's legs around her hips and lifted her into her lap. "Talk to me."

Sarah put her arms around Jordan and let the blessed feeling of connection fill her. She could do anything when she felt this. "I want you to do things to me."

Jordan began to rock slowly. "What things?"

"Things from the books," she admitted. "I filled out one of those lists."

"A play list?"

Sarah could almost see the list of dungeon activities in her mind's eye. "Yes."

"All right. Do you want to show it to me?"

Burying her face in Jordan's hair, she nodded. "But, I'm afraid."

Jordan's arms tightened. "I know, baby, but you don't need to be. Whatever it is you want me to do, I want you to enjoy it. I'll do everything I can to make it good for you. The last thing I want is for you to be afraid to ask for what you want. I'm glad you told me."

"Jordan?"

"Yes, baby?"

"What do *you* want to do to me?"

"Hmm. Is bondage on your list?"

Sarah's entire body tightened with need. Sucking air through her teeth, she pressed her groin into Jordan's belly. "Yes," she hissed.

"Ahh," Jordan groaned. Her hands kneaded Sarah's back roughly. "That's what I want. To tie you to the bed and torment you with ecstasy."

Sarah tilted Jordan's head back and kissed her hungrily. She sucked at the generous mouth as her body was lowered to the bed and Jordan covered her. Her hands were forced over her head and Jordan held them there with one hand. Sarah cried out her pleasure as Jordan's other hand slipped between her legs. It was so *good*. More quickly than she would have thought possible, Sarah slipped into ecstasy.

"You're mine," Jordan growled possessively. "*Mine*."

Sarah's hands were released and she moved them to the dark head, holding Jordan close. The feelings inside of her were too brilliant to verbalize. Sarah could only hold onto her lover and let her emotions sing.

~***~

"I've got good news and bad news."

Sarah dropped her pack by the door and started to remove her winter layers. Jordan was sitting on the couch with the play list Sarah had left with her that morning. "What's the bad news?"

Jordan dropped her head back on the sofa. "I want a kiss first."

Sarah leaned over intending to give her a quick kiss, but it wasn't that simple. Her lips lingered until her toes began to tingle. Tangling her fingers in the short hair, Sarah indulged herself. If she was going to hear bad news, she wanted the memory of that kiss to buffer her.

"Welcome home, little one," Jordan murmured with a smile.

Sarah smiled back and pulled her sweater off. "So, what's the bad news?"

"You need to redo your list. Or at least, clarify a few things."

The sweatshirt was next. "Why?"

"For starters, you put down a yes on cunnilingus. If you don't like it, but you're willing to try it at some point, you should have put a maybe."

"Why? I'm not against it. I just don't usually enjoy it."

"Then, you should say that. My concern is that you have things on here that you'll *let* me do, but not because you necessarily want them. The point of the list is to tell me what you like, what you won't do and what you *might* do under the right circumstances. If I didn't know you, I would assume that you wanted me to go down on you without discussion first. This list isn't about what I want. It's about what you want."

Sarah kicked off her shoes and brushed her hair back with her fingers. "Okay. This conversation is a little strange for just having walked in the door. I need something to drink. Do you want anything?"

"No, thank you."

Picking up a scrunchy off the kitchen counter, Sarah tied her hair back and opened the fridge. Her belly asked for orange juice, but she grabbed a wine cooler instead. She hadn't been thinking much of anything when she had opened the front door, but jumping right into a discussion on playing had thrown her off kilter.

"Sorry about that."

Sarah jumped. Jordan was right behind her. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

Jordan cocked her head thoughtfully. "Did you have a bad day at school?"

"No."

"Do you want me to come back later?"

Sarah moved to the other side of the kitchen and leaned back against the counter. She was half tempted to say yes. "No."

Looking confused, Jordan ran a hand through her hair. "Are you angry with me?"

"Should I be?"

The rugged face shut down. "I don't want to play this game. If you're mad, say so. I can handle you being upset, but don't mock me with it."

Sarah's heart hurt, but she couldn't stop herself. "Maybe you should go. I've got a lot of studying to do."

Jordan nodded. "All right. Call me later if you want to talk."

Sarah consoled herself with her drink while she listened to Jordan dress for the cold and walk out the front door. She wasn't sure what had just happened and she didn't want to think about it. Retrieving her pack, she sat down at her desk and opened her books.

It took over three hours for her mad to dissipate and then she realized that what she felt was hurt. Another hour passed before she felt ready to talk about it. Clicking on the Messenger icon on the computers Start bar, she saw that Jordan was online. Sarah opened the text box and started to type.

Littleone777: Are you mad at me?

The response came back right away.

Mastercrisp99: I'm confused.

Littleone777: You hurt my feelings.

Mastercrisp99: That wasn't my intention. What did I do?

Sarah brushed a tear from her cheek before explaining.

Littleone777: Admitting all of that stuff to you and to myself was like ripping my heart out and then I walk in the door and you tell me I did it wrong. Making that list was really hard. Giving it to you was even harder. I know that you didn't mean to hurt my feelings, but you did. Maybe I'm being too sensitive, but I'm doing the best I can. I'm sorry if I'm acting like a baby.

Hitting Send, Sarah waited anxiously for a response.

Mastercrisp99: I'm so sorry, Sarah. You're not being too sensitive and you're not acting like a baby. I'm a jerk. I've seen so many lists over the years and I forgot that you aren't one of my players. I dived into it as the DM and not as your lover. You have every right to be mad at me. What can I do to make it up to you?

Sarah felt a little bit better now.

Littleone777: I'm not mad anymore.

Mastercrisp99: Would it help if I came over and groveled for your forgiveness?

The image made Sarah smile a little.

Littleone777: You don't need to do that. If you come down, you'll kiss me or touch me and make everything all right.

Mastercrisp99: And that would be bad?

Littleone777: No, but I don't think I'm done pouting yet. Maybe tomorrow?

Mastercrisp99: It's a date.

Littleone777: By the way, what was the good news?

Mastercrisp99: We have a high degree of compatibility.

Littleone777: That sounds good.

Mastercrisp99: It is, if I can get my head out of my ass.

Sarah laughed out loud. Even from a distance, Jordan had a knack for making everything all right.

Littleone777: Do you have any special instructions on how to fix the list? I'm done studying and there's nothing to watch on TV so I'm going to go over it.

It was several minutes before Jordan answered her.

Mastercrisp99: I just emailed you my list. Note that all of the things we both said we don't want to do are at the end. If you print it out, you can delete my remarks and write your own, then send it back to me when you're done. I cannot stress enough that my list should not influence yours. The whole point is to be honest about what we want and then compare the lists to see where we're in sync. You can, however, tell me on your list how you felt about mine. The better I understand how you think and feel, the better I can be for you.

Sarah opened her mailbox and found Jordan's list. She chewed absently on a thumbnail as she read the first few lines.

Age play: I do much better playing daddy to an infant than a juvenile. This is not my strong suit in role-playing games, though it can be interesting. I should mention that if you want to do this, I will not include sex in the scene. It gives me the creeps.

Anal play: I love this. There is nothing more intimate or personal. Very intense both to give and receive. I'm very good at this.

Animal play: I never really understood the desire to feel like an animal or to treat someone like one. I can do it, but I don't really get anything out of it. Ditto on the sex restriction from Age Play.

Bisexual play: I'm kind of a unique case, don't you think? I've been with men and don't want to do it again. While I can't tell you what to do with your life or your body, I can't be a part of you being with one.

Mastercrisp99: Sarah?

Blinking at the window, Sarah realized she'd forgotten Jordan was waiting.

Littleone777: Sorry. I was reading your list. I think I understand what you want me to do.

Mastercrisp99: Good. I'm going to work for a while. If you have any questions or just want to talk, I'll be here.

Littleone777: Thanks.

Minimizing the Messenger window, Sarah went back to reading.

Body modification: For the most part, this is a big NO. Exceptions: tattoos can be sexy, though I would not ask you to get one. If you do it on your own, don't do my name. It would upset me. Also, you should know that I am licensed by the State as a piercer. I do all the players. If it's something that interests you, I'll negotiate what I'm willing to pierce. For myself? Big needle phobia. No tats or holes in this body.

Sarah opened the window to Jordan.

Littleone777: Will you pierce my ears? I've always wanted to do it. First I couldn't afford it and lately I haven't gotten around to it.

Mastercrisp99: Sure.

Littleone777: When?

Mastercrisp99: Tomorrow after school?

Littleone777: Cool.

Body worship: I'm all over this one.

Bondage: Probably my very favorite thing in the whole world of BDSM. I've studied it extensively and enjoy both movement restriction and purely decorative bondage. I'm willing to discuss this with you at length.

Clips and Clamps: I enjoy using these. I am even willing to let you use them on me within reason. I find they generally enhance the sensual experience.

Corsets: Basically a form of breath control which I do not normally endorse. Overuse is something I find very unattractive, but I think I'd enjoy seeing you in one from time to time for purely visual reasons.

Cross dressing: I will not wear a dress. This is not negotiable. You'd look cute as a boy though. We could do the gay bars. Might be fun.

Sarah had to smile at the thought of Jordan in a dress. A stranger image was hard to come up with and she didn't think she'd be believable as a boy.

Daddy/Daddy's girl: this one goes hand in hand with Mommy/Mommy's girl. It's a sexual game and I'm not fond of it. Minus the sexual connotations, it's doable.

Discipline: This is a large category. I like spanking-either with my hand or with a tool. It makes me very excited to spank a woman who enjoys it. I'm cheating here because I read your list earlier. You put a maybe by it. The possibility that you might let me do it is a turn on for me. On the other hand, I worry that you'll hate it and hate me for doing it. I'd like to suggest tabling this for a while. The other part of discipline relates to Slave Training. I'll write more later.

Exhibitionism: When I was younger, I enjoyed this. There is a special fear to baring your body in front of others that is exquisitely arousing. In order to protect my cover, I've not savored this for years. When I think about playing in the dungeon, this is the part I miss the most. As for you, if it's something you someday want to do, I'd very much enjoy being there. I would love the opportunity to display you.

Sarah took a deep breath. It wasn't something she thought she could do in real life, but she did fantasize about it. She could picture Jordan in her tuxedo and herself-very naked-on Jordan's arm. Maybe wearing high heels and some modest jewelry, but nothing else. Sarah thought she might understand the 'special fear' that Jordan mentioned. Just thinking about that fantasy brought it on. The fact that Jordan could very easily arrange to have that fantasy come true only made the feeling stronger.

Fantasies: I'm totally flexible in this area. Tell me what you want and I'll do it.

Fisting: I understand why this was on your NO list, but it's something I've always wanted to experience. Your hands are quite small and I think, with some practice, I could take one inside of me. I was uncertain if your NO was just for you or if it was for me, too. I'd like to talk about it sometime.

Making a fist, Sarah imagined what it would be like. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Jordan in the process, but if it could be done, she was willing.

Furniture training: I already have furniture and it didn't need any training.

Sarah laughed. She'd put a maybe beside it only because it didn't sound all that dangerous. Knowing how Jordan felt about it made it possible to admit that it hadn't interested her at all.

Group scenes: In front of a group? Possibly. With a group? Not if it means I have to suffer anyone else touching you. (I probably should have mentioned that I don't want to share you with anyone. I'm feeling very possessive about you.)

Hot wax: It can be fun if you don't mind cleaning up afterwards. The same goes for food and sex.

Leather: As you've probably noticed, I love leather. I like the way it smells and feels and looks. I'm curious as to how you feel about it. Would love to get you some leather clothes. Maybe one of

those short skirts and a leather jacket. Grrr.

Lingerie: Do boxers count if they're made of silk or satin? I do love a woman in lingerie though. Another thing I'd like to fill your closet with.

Masturbation: Yum! I'd love to watch you and would love to watch you watching me.

Pain: This is another category I suggest we table for a while. There are so many fun things we can do. If we play with clips and clamps and you enjoy it, we'll revisit this subject.

Safe words: I know you've read about these. You need to choose one. It can be used at any time and I will stop whatever we are doing. Don't ever be afraid to stop me. In the dungeon, the safe word is RED. My personal safe word is PHOENIX.

Shaving: Fun, fun, fun. Shave or be shaved, that is the question. I've got a straight razor and I know how to use it. I'd love to prove it.

Slave training: We talked about this the other day, but I've been holding back some. While I do not desire a 24/7 slave at this point in my life, I would be interested in giving you some training. (Do I need to remind you that even this is negotiable?) For me, slave training is about control. I would occasionally like to feel that I have the right to control you. I'd like to be able to give you an order and have you carry it out. I'd like to have you kneel at my feet now and then. I'd like to have you in the dungeon as my slave for the night. The fact that you are so strong and brave would make your willing submission almost unbearably exciting. More so because I am so completely unable to do it myself. I can not bend my knee to anyone. I've never been able to do it. I can open my heart to you without reservation, but don't ask me to kneel. Maybe that's why I find submission so erotic. As for discipline in training, it is necessary. I'm not one for punishment with the strap, but during a training session, discipline is crucial to making the 'slave' understand what the Master wants and expects. It's about getting the slave's mind into the proper space. I can not tell you what the slave gets out of it. I've read the books, too, but it's not something I understand in my gut. If it's something you want to do with me, you'll either experience it or you won't. If not, then it's not for us. As I believe I mentioned before, there are moments when I can feel your surrender of control to me and those moments are all I require from you in this area. If we explore this further, it will be to satisfy a need within you.

Toys: I've got just about every toy devised. If you want to play with one, let me know. I would occasionally be willing to be on the receiving end as well. Remember that it's not about the toy. It's about making each other feel good.

Other: As you have no doubt noticed, my list is considerably shorter than yours was. There are about 50 subcategories for bondage alone. It's not strictly necessary for you to answer every single one. We are not strangers negotiating a scene in the dungeon. We're lovers. If I tie you up, be assured that you'll have a say in every step of it. I eliminated a lot of the pain categories. I'm very uneasy about initiating pain into our love life at this point. We'll talk about it when and if you ever feel like you need it. Feel free to add anything I've left out that you want to talk about. Keep in mind that as time goes by, we may add or subtract things on our lists. Nothing is carved

in stone. We're just establishing a starting point. Talking about all of this doesn't commit you to anything, even if it's something you want to do.

Sarah had only glanced at the NO list tagged onto the end. Now, she printed a copy and re-read the whole thing. Not knowing what Jordan felt about these things had been a difficulty she was only now aware of. Rather than feeling that she was going to be influenced by Jordan's list, she felt freed by it.

Littleone777: Thank you for your list. It's helped me a lot. I think I needed to know your answers before I could be honest about my own.

Mastercrisp99: Glad to be of help. About earlier. I was terribly insensitive. I'm really sorry about that. Can you forgive me?

Smiling, Sarah replied.

Littleone777: Of course. I think I'm over my pout. I'm sorry it took so long for me to figure out what I was feeling. Can *you* forgive *me*?

Mastercrisp99: Done.

Littleone777: Is this the part where we kiss and make up?

Mastercrisp99: I would very much like it to be.

Happy again, Sarah typed in a response and sent it.

Littleone777: I'll be naked by the time you get here. Don't knock.

Mastercrisp99: I wasn't going to.

Laughing, Sarah turned off her computer and raced for the bedroom.

~***~

"Do they sting at all?"

"No. They just feel warm." Sarah could feel the weight of the studs in her ears. It wasn't much, but she was very conscious of them. The first one had made her jump because of the sound of the gun going off, but it hadn't really hurt at all.

"If they start to sting, tell me right away. These are hypo-allergenic, but stinging could mean an infection. Once they're healed, you can try other metals. Some people are allergic to gold or silver. If you are, they'll start to sting right away."

A strange feeling was growing in Sarah. "I feel like I've been . . . tagged as yours."

Jordan took off her latex gloves with a snap and a smile. "I feel a little like that, too."

"I like it," she admitted.

"So do I."

"How much do I owe you for the studs?"

"A kiss ought to cover it."

Sarah made it worth Jordan's investment and then went to a mirror to see the results. Sure enough, she had earrings. Turning her head this way and that, she studied them. "I have to leave them in for a month?"

"About that. I'll keep an eye on them and let you know when you can start changing them."

Sarah turned and smiled at Jordan. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, baby."

"I want to show Maggie. I'll be right back."

As their cottages were so close together, Sarah didn't bother to dress for the weather. Running lightly through the snow, she knocked on Maggie's door. It was opened in moments. "Look what Jordan did," she said as she stepped inside the warm house.

Maggie peered closely. "How pretty. You have nice ears for earrings."

Sarah fingered her lobes gingerly. "I always wanted to get my ears pierced. It's cool that Jordan can do it. Getting it done at the mall always seemed kind of weird."

"Do you have earrings?"

"Only these."

Maggie smiled. "Then I've got a pair for you to start your collection."

"You don't have to do that."

"Heavens, dear, I know that. Don't be silly."

Maggie fetched a jewelry box from her bedroom and they sat on the couch to go through it. The contents were not organized at all, but Sarah was surprised at how much there was. "Wow. You've got some really nice stuff, Maggie." She lifted a strand free of the tangle. "Are these real pearls?"

"Cultured ones, yes. They were grown. Now, this one is the real thing."

She lifted a strand free and laid it over her hand. It was beautiful.

"This was my grandmother's," Maggie explained. "It was given to her on her 16th birthday by her parents. She gave it to my mother on her wedding day and it came to me after she died. Someday, it will be yours."

"No," Sarah breathed. "You can't give that away."

"Not just yet, dear, but it's a family heirloom. It's meant to be passed along. Someday you'll pass it on, too."

Sarah thought she might cry. "I'd rather have you than a necklace."

Maggie put a hand to Sarah's cheek. "Aren't you sweet."

"Don't die, okay?"

Maggie made a rude noise. "Every one does it, dear, but I'm good for another ten or fifteen years. There's plenty of time to worry about that later." Putting the necklace back in the box, she searched through the precious metals and gems.

Sarah forced herself to let go of her fear for Maggie's eventual demise. There wasn't a lot she could do about it right now.

"I love these."

The tear drop opals were exquisite. The more Sarah looked at them, the more alive they seemed inside. "These are gorgeous."

"I got them a few years ago on a trip to Australia. They cost an arm and a leg, but I just couldn't leave without them."

Between Maggie's memories and appreciating the beautiful jewelry, Sarah lost track of time. Two hours passed in a blink of the eye. With her new antique diamond earrings in her hand, Sarah pressed Maggie to come over for dinner. It was the least she could do for the gift of jewelry and Maggie had been left out a lot lately. Inviting her for dinner made Sarah feel better.

The radio was on and Jordan was sound asleep on the sofa.

"Isn't he cute?" Maggie crooned.

Sarah thought so, too, but said nothing.

"Looks like you've worn him out."

"*Maggie*," she hissed in embarrassment.

The old woman chuckled knowingly. "I think it's wonderful, dear. Can I help you cook?"

Sarah decided on stir-fry. She had a lot of individual ingredients, but not enough to serve three people separately. Maggie sat at the counter to chop vegetables while Sarah started the chicken and rice. An old Stevie Wonder song came on and Sarah started to dance. Only a little, but she felt too much happiness to hold it in and the dancing helped. Maggie was smiling at her and Jordan was sleeping in the living room. It just didn't get any better.

The dancing was addictive. Sarah incorporated it into her cooking, feeling sexy and free and playful. Her inhibitions evaporated and she gyrated to the beat. Maggie's head began to bob and Sarah laughed. Maggie liked Prince!

Putting the rice on simmer, Sarah reached for Maggie's hand. "Dance with me?"

Maggie set the knife aside with a grin. "I'd love to."

Prince segued into Def Leppard and Sarah turned it on, her hips and shoulders getting into it with abandon. And then, Jordan was there with her, their bodies flirting and enticing. Jordan could *move*! They danced all the time, but not like this. Ballroom dancing was terribly erotic in its fluid precision, but this was raw passion and it drank Sarah in. The fact that Maggie was watching only fueled Sarah's wantonness. She *wanted* to be seen with Jordan like this. Having a witness made it real.

The song ended as Jordan kissed her and Sarah melted under the eager lips. *Now* she was embarrassed. Sarah pulled back with a shy smile. "I need to check the rice."

Jordan let her go with a smile and turned to Maggie. "I saw you making the moves on my girl."

"You snooze, you lose," Maggie shrugged.

Jordan threw her head back with a laugh and reached for Maggie. "Let's dance, old woman."

Sarah watched them happily. They were doing some old fifties dance step to Eric Clapton and Jordan oozed gentleness in the way she handled the fragile woman. There was love in the room and Sarah ached with it. Was this what family was supposed to mean? How did people take this for granted? It was marvelous!

[Continued...](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Four

Pete and Amanda's wedding was lovely. Amanda's dress was fantastic and it took two young boys to handle her train. They did a beautiful little candle lighting ceremony that brought tears to Sarah's eyes, but she had to smile when they ended the ceremony by jumping over a broom. She knew it was a historical reference to the marriage ceremony for slaves, but it felt like the newlyweds were honoring the sacrifices of their ancestors with the ritual.

During the professional photo shoot after the ceremony, Sarah wandered the edge of the room and took pictures with her digital camera. She got several of Jordan, but mostly she concentrated on the candid shots the photographer was missing in his quest for posed perfection. Sarah had no idea who most of the people were so she just watched for moments of connection. The flower girl and the ring bearer were adorable in their wedding clothes and she got several of them. She even caught the fathers of the bride and groom sharing a hip flask and a guilty look.

People looked at her now and then, but by and large, her presence was negligible. Sarah preferred it that way. It made taking pictures easier and meant she didn't have to worry about what to say. Soon enough, it was over. Jordan joined her at once.

"What did you think of the wedding?"

"It was wonderful."

"Are you ready to party?"

Sarah slipped her hand through the offered elbow. "Lead on."

It was a ten minute drive to the hotel that was hosting the reception. Jordan parked the Jaguar and reached out for Sarah's hand. "Wait."

Curious, Sarah sat silently.

Jordan swallowed in uncharacteristic nervousness. "I've been trying to do this all day and I'm afraid if I don't just do it, it'll get away from me."

"Do what?"

Taking a deep breath, Jordan fished a small wrapped gift from under the car seat. "I love you and I want you to have this. I mean, it's Valentine's Day."

Sarah put a hand over her mouth. "Oh, God. I didn't think. It never occurred to me . . . I didn't get you anything."

Jordan's eyes relaxed and she smiled. "You give me everything, little one. I've never been so happy. I don't need a gift."

"Neither do I," she argued. "I'm sorry, Jordan. I just didn't put it together in my head. I haven't had to think about Valentine's Day since I was in grade school."

"Sarah," Jordan said firmly. "All I want is to give you this and hopefully see that you like it. Give me your pleasure in the gift and I'll be happy. If you like it a lot, maybe you'll give me a kiss, too. Please?"

She felt stuck between a rock and a hard place. It wasn't fair to turn down the gift just because she had forgotten.

"I love you, Sarah. Please accept this gift as a small token of my feelings for you."

Damn! Now she couldn't refuse without hurting Jordan. Sarah opened the gift to find a slender gold bracelet. It was utterly unremarkable, but it spoke volumes to her. Jordan could have spent a ton of money on diamonds and jewels, but she hadn't. It meant that she knew how uncomfortable

Sarah would have been with it and that how she felt mattered to Jordan. It was thoughtful and sweet and charming in its simplicity and Sarah thought it was perfect. She lifted it up on gentle fingers to catch the light. "It's perfect, Jordan. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

It was clear to see that Jordan was pleased. Sarah leaned over to kiss her. "Will you put it on me?"

"My pleasure."

Sarah watched the concentration on Jordan's face with a feeling of tenderness. She still felt foolish for letting Valentine's Day slip by her, but at least Jordan hadn't made it intolerable. She really was quite gallant. "You constantly surprise me," she said softly.

"Is that a good thing?"

"So far," Sarah conceded with a grin.

Jordan finished securing the bracelet and lifted Sarah's hand to her lips. "Shall we go in?"

The reception hall was set up for dining with long tables, silver and crystal. It was perfection. Sarah left her gift beside the small mountain of presents for the happy couple. It had been hard to figure out what to get them, but she had settled on a bamboo wind chime that sounded like rain to her. Now, looking at the hall, she wondered if she should have gone with something more elegant. "Jordan? What did you give them?"

"I paid for the wedding. Why?"

"I got them a wind chime. A wood one. What if they hate it?"

"They won't hate it, little one. Trust me. Don't start feeling insecure. Your gift shows creativity and thought. How much imagination does it take to pick out a blender? One of us should stay sober for driving home later. Do you want to flip for it?"

"You go ahead," Sarah said. "I'll stick to soda or something."

The bride and groom arrived by limousine a short time later and the party began. An army of waiters served dinner with quiet precision and the room was filled with talking and laughter. A great many toasts were given, including one by Jordan. Sarah made her single glass of champagne last through them all.

After the meal, the tables were cleared away and the floor was opened for dancing. Sarah watched the newlyweds take the first dance. They were so happy and every one watching them was obviously happy for them. Not that it appeared either of them knew how to dance. At least, not ballroom dancing.

Jordan leaned down to talk to her. "I'm going to have to dance with a few people. It's part of standing up with him at the wedding. Will you be all right until I'm done?"

"Of course. I'll go hang out with Maggie and her friend."

"I love you, baby."

Sarah smiled. "I love watching you dance."

"You're so beautiful."

Sarah realized that Jordan was a little intoxicated. Not enough to be noticeable yet, but definitely tipsy. "You're drunk."

"Not quite, but I'm getting there. You're still beautiful."

"So are you. Go do your thing."

Sarah spent the next hour circulating with Maggie and Hazel. They didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that they didn't know very many people. Sarah was drawn into a number of conversations and learned that strangers weren't so hard to get along with. You just had to suck it up and introduce yourself. She met aunts and uncles, cousins and in-laws, grandparents and friends. Everyone was very nice.

Every time she looked, Jordan was dancing with another woman. She looked to be having a good time and it made Sarah start to feel jealous. It was an uncomfortable emotion and Sarah kept trying to banish it. When another of Pete's men asked her to dance, Sarah impulsively said yes.

"My name's Trip."

Being in his arms was nothing like being in Jordan's arms. It was more than the fact that he didn't dance right. It just felt wrong. "Trip?"

"It's in the way of a nickname. What's your name?"

"Sarah."

"You're with Jordan?"

She didn't want to confide in this man. "I work for him."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a maid."

"Are you seeing anyone?"

Sarah was stunned. "Are you hitting on me?"

Trip smiled and one gold tooth winked at her. "Well, now, that all depends."

"On what?"

"Do you want me to hit on you?"

"Not in particular."

"Because I'm black?"

Sarah took a chance. "Are you dancing with me because I'm white?"

"Yes."

It was ludicrous. Sarah shook her head in disbelief. "You're kind of a jerk, Trip."

He only laughed and then leaned a little closer. "You know, it's true what they say about black men."

She opened her mouth to ask him what he meant and felt him rub against her hip. It was the most disgusting thing ever and made her furious. Sarah deliberately laughed at him. "Is that all you've got?"

"You'll feel me, girl."

Sarah took a half step back. "Feel this." She brought her knee up sharply and connected squarely with his groin. Trip staggered back and curled around his wounded genitals with a high-pitched whine. Sarah's moment of righteous wrath faded as she realized what she had done. She couldn't go around kneeing rude guys in the balls at other people's weddings. Sarah looked around to find the other dancers smiling at her.

"You go, girl," one of them laughed.

Embarrassed, Sarah slapped the woman's upraised hand and turned to leave the dance floor. She ran right into Jordan's broad chest. Strong hands grasped her upper arms and kept her from falling.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

Jordan's face and voice were as hard as Sarah had ever seen them. Sarah knew instantly that if she didn't intervene, Jordan would do something stupid and unnecessary. She only knew one way to distract Jordan. Sarah slid her hands over her lover's hidden breasts and stretched up on her

toes to whisper, "I'm not wearing anything under my dress."

Jordan blinked and dragged her eyes from the rejected suitor to Sarah. "What?"

She almost had her. "I'm naked." A hand slid over Sarah's hip slowly and Jordan began to smile seductively. Sarah relaxed.

"I guess I'll kill Trip later. After you tell me what he did."

"Dance with me, Ace."

Jordan moved into Sarah's body with supreme confidence and authority. Sarah surrendered without hesitation and saw the glow of pride in her lover's eyes. It made her feel warm and happy to know that she had given that feeling to Jordan. A firm thigh insinuated itself into Sarah's sex and she shivered with pleasure. She could feel what Jordan was packing in her boxers and it was nothing like what she had felt with Trip. "I feel you," she said with soft desire.

"I'm so hard," Jordan breathed in her ear. "You make me crazy with wanting."

Sarah was feeling a little crazy and reckless herself. Their bodies moved in perfect harmony and she was completely aware of how close to naked she really was. It had not been a deliberate thing. A bra was out of the question because of the strapless shoulder and all of her underwear had left panty lines. Going without had just made sense at the time. The fact that she was enjoying how she felt made her wonder what had happened to the girl nervous about showing her belly button at the Halloween party. She had changed somewhere along the line.

For a moment, it made her uncomfortable, but Sarah realized that she liked the woman she was becoming. Just the fact that she was starting to think of herself as a woman and not a girl was a new development.

Jordan abruptly started laughing.

"What?" Sarah looked around, but nothing was happening. "What is it?"

"Just trying to reconcile the yielding woman in my arms with the Amazon who nipped Pete's little brother at a wedding reception."

Sarah put images of Pete and Trip side by side. "That was his brother? They don't look anything alike. Do they have the same parents?"

Jordan only laughed harder. "Air," she gasped. "I need air."

Sarah had to quick step to keep up. It was cold outside. The sky was clear and there was no wind, but there was a bitter chill that cut through her filmy dress. It hardened her nipples instantly. Sarah hugged herself as her teeth began to chatter.

"You totally nailed him," Jordan wheezed. "Adam and Eve felt that one."

"He deserved it." Jordan took off her jacket and wrapped it around Sarah. Her body heat was still in it and Sarah snuggled it gratefully. "Thanks."

Jordan's laughter was easing up. "What did he do?"

"He made a pass at me. It was no big deal."

"I think I'm over wanting to kill him," Jordan grinned. "What was it exactly that he did?"

"I handled it," Sarah insisted.

"You're not going to tell me?"

Sarah shook her head.

Jordan looked very surprised. "Why not?"

"Because it was gross and I don't want to talk about it."

"You can tell me anything, little one."

"Do I have to?"

Jordan took a sobering step back. "You make an excellent point." Her humor returned like a light coming on. "I wish I had it on film. It was a thing of beauty."

"I hope I didn't hurt him too bad."

"I hope they ache for days."

"Have you had enough air? It's freezing out here."

"Sure. Come on."

The warmth of the hall was a welcome relief. They didn't get ten steps before Maggie caught them.

"Is everything all right, dear?"

"Jordan just needed some air."

Maggie took her arm conspiratorially. "Every one is talking about you. Something about Pete's brother?"

Sarah flushed with embarrassment. "I can't believe I did that."

"The consensus is that it was high time. You're something of a heroine. What happened?"

"She nipped the bastard," Jordan bragged.

Maggie's eyes widened. "Did you really?"

Sarah covered her eyes with a sigh. "I'm never going to live this down. I'm going to be remembered forever as the girl who crippled Pete's brother. I'll never get invited to another wedding."

"Maybe not Trip's," Jordan said dryly.

Maggie slapped at Jordan's arm. "Go get us a drink. I'll handle this."

Jordan wandered off without her coat and Sarah hugged it in her absence. "He thinks it's funny. For a minute there, I thought he was going to kill Trip. I've never seen him so angry."

"You don't strike me as the sort of girl who fights back for no reason. What did Trip do?"

Sarah glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. "He was rubbing his crotch on me. It was gross."

Maggie grimaced.

"Do women usually respond to that?"

"From the right man in the right time and place. Not from a total stranger at a wedding reception. You did the right thing, dear. I'm proud of you."

Sarah wanted to believe her. "I didn't tell Jordan. He was so mad, Maggie. I really thought he would try to kill him. Thank God he's a little drunk or I might not have been able to distract him."

"He probably wouldn't have actually killed him, dear, but this is not the time or the place for fisticuffs. It would have ruined the reception for Pete and Amanda. It sounds to me like you handled everything just right."

"You won't tell Jordan, will you?"

"Of course not, dear. This is just between us girls. What you need to do now is hold your head high and be proud. Don't apologize to anyone for it. If anyone asks you about it, tell them you were adjusting Trip's hormone level."

Sarah burst out laughing.

"That's better. Now, go find your man and do some more dancing. The night is young."

As it got later, the older crowd left and the music got faster. Jordan got a little drunker, but she was jovial rather than belligerent. Sarah thought it was kind of funny to watch her. She got a chance to talk to Pete and she treated his apology for his brother as if it were unnecessary. Amanda congratulated her on her aim and asked if she'd like to have lunch after the honeymoon. Sarah readily accepted.

There was one tense moment for Sarah. She and Jordan were in the buffet line when Trip walked by them. Jordan casually reached out and put a hand on his neck. Pulling him close, Jordan whispered in his ear and then looked him in the eye with a deadly smile. Sarah saw him swallow hard, then turn and walk away.

"What did you say to him?" she asked.

Jordan raised an eyebrow. "What did he do to you?"

"Umm..."

"It's okay, Sarah. It's over as far as I'm concerned. There's nothing to worry about."

She was dying to know what was said, but she could tell she wasn't going to get any more information from Jordan. Sarah shrugged and let it go.

After the newlyweds left in their limousine, the party got a little wild. At least, Sarah's little piece of it did. Jordan had that smoky, amorous look in her eye. Since Sarah didn't know anyone else at the party, she judged it safe and danced teasingly for Jordan. It was hot and sexy and the most fun she'd ever had. They were all but making love on the floor in front of God and everybody. Jordan looked ready to explode.

Sarah finally decided it was time to go. Teasing wasn't enough anymore. She collected their things and took Jordan's keys. Jordan sang all the way to the car. She didn't know all the words to 'Wanna Kiss You All Over', but Sarah gave her points for volume and flair.

Driving the Jaguar was sweet. Even on the icy streets, it ran like warm butter. They were halfway home when Jordan reached under Sarah's dress.

"You're so wet. Wanna fuck you so bad."

Sarah grabbed at Jordan's wrist with a laugh. "Easy, Ace. Keep that up and I'll drive us into a tree."

Jordan abruptly looked like she was going to cry. "Almost lost you. Felt like I was dying, too."

Sarah lifted Jordan's hand to her lips, her own scent rich on the long fingers. "Everything is okay,

Jordan. I'm just fine."

"You're perfect," Jordan said dreamily. She hiccuped. "Better pull over, baby."

"We're almost home."

"Sick."

Sarah aimed the car at the side of the road, but it was too late. Jordan threw up all over everything. The windshield, the dash, the stick shift and both of them. It was all Sarah could do not to vomit herself. Pulling to a stop, she jumped out of the car.

"Ugh." It was all down one leg and she grabbed handfuls of snow to get it off. "I can't believe you threw up on me. Couldn't you have waited until I pulled over?"

Jordan fell out of the other side of the car and Sarah walked around to look down at her. Propped up on her elbows, Jordan was vomiting helplessly. It sounded like she was going to die. Sarah put her hands on her hips. "I so hope you remember this in the morning."

Leaving her there, Sarah fished the keys out of the car and opened the trunk. "Thank you, Cirenio." There were rags, a blanket, a flashlight, road flares, some basic tools and a bottle of water tucked in one corner. Promising to hug Cirenio later, she grabbed the rags and the water and set about cleaning the inside of the car enough to drive.

"Sarah?"

She didn't even look up. "Don't pass out. I'm not going to be able to get you back in the car by myself."

"I'm sick."

"Duh."

"Cold."

Sarah had to admit that the car was as good as she could get it for the moment. There was nothing she could do about the sour stench. Tossing the rags on the passenger side floorboards, Sarah went around to help Jordan. It was like trying to pick up mercury.

It was a relief when the cop pulled up behind them with his lights flashing. Sarah tucked her frozen fingers up under her arm pits while he got out of the car and played his flashlight over the two of them. "You don't know how glad I am to see you," she said as he approached.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I didn't know what I was getting into when I agreed to be the designated driver. He's drunk and

he threw up inside the car. I've got it cleaned up enough to drive, but I can't get him back in." The flashlight hit her square in the eyes.

"Have you been drinking, ma'am?"

"No," she said patiently. "We were at a wedding reception. I had a single glass of champagne between six and six-thirty, but no alcohol since then. I'd be happy to take a breathalyzer test, but I'd like to get him out of the snow first. Will you help me?"

He seemed to be happy with that answer and had Jordan in the car in only minutes. Jordan's head lolled in a drunken stupor. She was clearly out for the night.

Now that things were back under control, Sarah was freezing. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably.

"Do you have someone to help you get him inside, ma'am?"

She thought of Maggie, but that wouldn't do. Sarah thought it over. On any other day, she would call Pete and ask for help. "The garage is heated and it has a bathroom. Maybe I can leave him in there."

"How far are you going?"

"Maybe ten minutes? To the Crisp Estate."

"I thought he looked familiar," the officer grinned. "I'll follow you and give you a hand."

"Thank you."

Fifteen minutes later, the officer dropped the blanket wrapped woman on the bed in one of the suites. "I can't thank you enough," Sarah said gratefully. "I couldn't have handled it on my own."

"Not a problem, ma'am. You have a good night."

Sarah walked him to the front door and locked it behind him. Peeling off the ruined high heels, she padded barefoot back to the bedroom. Jordan was snoring. "You owe me big for this," Sarah told the comatose woman.

It wasn't easy, but she got Jordan stripped and cleaned up, then rolled her between the sheets. Gathering up the soiled clothing, she tossed it all in the tub and threw her dress on top of it. Too late, she realized that neither of them had clothes. No way was she going to put that dress back on. Wrapping herself in a lush towel, she went down to Jordan's room and took a shower. After drying her hair, she pulled on a T-shirt and a pair of Jordan's boxers. They were both too big, but they would do. For Jordan, she took a pair of striped pajama's and headed back upstairs.

Jordan was huddled over the toilet with the dry heaves. Wetting a wash cloth, she pressed it to the back of the kneeling woman's neck. "How are you doing, Ace?"

Jordan put her head down on her arm with a groan. "Feel terrible."

"If I find you some aspirin, do you think you can keep it down?"

Eyes closed, Jordan shook her head. "Just leave me here."

"You'll freeze to death on this tile."

"Don't care."

"Well, I do. Stay put. I'll be right back."

Maggie kept aspirin in the kitchen. Sarah took three of them and went back. Jordan was still hunched miserably over the toilet. Sarah got the aspirin and a half glass of water into her and then helped her with the pajama's.

"Never drinking again," Jordan said as she fell back into bed.

"That's got my vote," Sarah agreed. "Go to sleep, Jordan. You can figure out how to make this up to me in the morning."

"Stay."

"I will. I'm just going to straighten up a bit. Go to sleep." She leaned over to kiss Jordan's forehead. A feeling of such tenderness welled up in her. "You mean so much to me," she whispered.

Jordan was out. Sarah brushed the dark hair back and reconsidered cleaning up. There was nothing she could do for the car at this hour of the night and the rest of it could be handled in the morning. Turning off lights, Sarah crawled in beside Jordan and went to sleep.

Sarah wandered into the kitchen shortly after dawn. "Morning."

Maggie set the paper down and took off her glasses. "Hello."

Pouring herself a cup of fresh coffee, Sarah dropped into a chair and held the steaming liquid under her nose. "You make the best coffee in the whole world."

"Thank you, dear. You're up early. What time did the two of you get home last night?"

"I don't know. It was a mess, Maggie. Jordan threw up in the Jag. All over me and the car and everything. Then this cop had to help me get her back in the car and into the house. I totally lost track of time." Sarah yawned so hard it brought tears to her eyes. "I wish I didn't have to go to school today."

"So don't. Go back to bed. I'll bring you a hearty breakfast in a couple of hours and you can take the day off."

"I can't."

"Why not? Can't one of your little friends take notes?"

Sarah considered it. She had two classes that day. One of them she could afford to miss and the other had one of the girls from her study group in it. So far as she knew, there were no exams or tests scheduled. She could get caught up without any trouble. "Maybe I will stay home. I can study later and read ahead."

"Good for you."

"Um, I don't have any clothes. My dress is ruined."

"I'll fetch something for you."

Sarah had another thought. "What time do the housekeepers start?"

"Nine."

"We're in the green suite. Are they going to be working there today?"

"I'll see that they don't."

"Thanks, Maggie."

"Go back to bed, dear."

Sarah went back downstairs and got a complete outfit for Jordan to wear when she woke up. It wouldn't do to have her wandering around as a woman with the staff in the house. Leaving the clothes on a chair, she crawled back into bed and snuggled up to Jordan. In spite of the coffee, she fell asleep almost instantly.

"Where the hell am I?"

Sarah stretched as Jordan's rough question woke her. "The green suite. I couldn't get you downstairs. How do you feel?"

"Like shit. My mouth tastes like road apples and my head hurts."

Sarah smiled. "Let that be a lesson to you."

Jordan grunted and slowly rolled out of bed. Sagging over her knees, she cradled her head in her hands. "This sucks."

Pulling the blankets up tight around her ears to keep the warmth in, Sarah yawned. "Come back to bed and sleep through it." Jordan cautiously got to her feet and staggered into the bathroom to pee. Sarah watched her, amazed at how unselfconscious Jordan was about it. Maybe it was the hangover.

"Looks like somebody had a party in here," Jordan grumbled. "Why are our clothes in the tub?"

"You threw up on them."

"Oh. I don't remember that." Jordan washed her hands and dug around in the drawers until she found a toothbrush. She struggled with the wrapper for a few minutes and then brought it to Sarah. "Open this for me."

Hiding a grin, she obeyed and handed it back. "There you go."

"Thanks." Jordan scrubbed her mouth thoroughly and drank water out of the palm of her hand before washing her face. She came back to bed and pulled Sarah close.

"Better?"

"Not much," Jordan sighed. "Did I do anything stupid?"

"Besides throwing up in the Jag and having to be carried into the house by a cop?"

Jordan groaned. "Besides that."

"No."

"Good."

"Next time, *you* get to be the designated driver. I quit."

"Sounds fair."

Sarah wrapped herself around Jordan and savored the heat. "I just can't seem to stay warm. It's like my bones are frozen."

Jordan rubbed Sarah's back with her hands. "No school today?"

"Too tired."

"Thanks for taking care of me, baby."

"You're welcome, Ace."

~***~

With Pete gone, Jordan had to fill in for him. Sarah hadn't realized how much Pete actually did. Pete never looked all that busy, but Jordan was swamped. A week into Pete's honeymoon, Jordan called Sarah on the phone.

"Do you know anything about spreadsheets and account balances?"

"Somewhat."

"I need you."

Laughing at Jordan's predicament and worried that she would make herself look foolish, Sarah went up to the house. Pete's office was a mess and Jordan looked to be at the end of her rope.

"What's the problem?"

"I was just inputting some of the bills and now it says I'm in the red by something like fifty thousand dollars. I've checked everything about ten times and I can't see where I went wrong. I'm about to chuck the damn thing out the window."

Sarah sat down in Pete's chair and studied the computer monitor. "Have you saved anything since you started?"

"No."

"Who was the last person to open this file?"

"Pete."

Sarah reopened the file without saving Jordan's changes and the balances looked much better.

"*Shit.*"

Grinning, Sarah looked up at her boss. "Why don't you show me what you want done and I'll see what I can do."

Jordan gathered some papers together and handed them to her. "These need to get paid and payroll is due."

"Have you written the checks out?"

"Not yet. I think some of them get deposited electronically. Doesn't this program do that?"

"I don't think so. Why don't you go relax and give me a chance to see if I can figure Pete's system out."

"Good luck," Jordan snorted derisively.

It took about an hour to get the hang of it. The hardest part was finding Pete's notes on passwords and account numbers. Thirty minutes later, she was done. The bills were paid and the payroll printed out. There were a few checks to sign for bills, but it hadn't been hard at all. Sarah was shocked at how much it cost to maintain the estate. The power bills alone were staggering. Not to mention that Jordan paid her people very well.

Sarah went looking for Jordan and found her in her office. "Here are the payroll checks to sign and if you'll sign these, I'll get them ready to mail."

"You did it?"

"Don't look so shocked. This is what I go to school for."

Jordan came around the desk and hugged Sarah hard. "*Thank you.*"

Sarah hugged her back. "Actually, it was kind of fun to find out that I could do it. If you need anymore help, just let me know."

"You're a lifesaver."

Jordan signed the checks and Sarah put them all in their envelopes. Leaving the payroll checks on the corner of the desk, Sarah straightened up a little and turned off the lights. She stopped outside of the kitchen door at the sound of her name.

". . . Sarah's a freaking genius. I spent half the day screwing that program up and she fixed it in two seconds flat. She figured out what to do and did it in less than two hours. Payroll, bills, everything. I've got her working as a *maid*, for Christ's sake."

"That was her choice," Maggie said calmly. "I don't imagine it's what she intends to do for the rest of her life."

"I worry about that, you know. I think she'll stay until she graduates, but then what? She can do anything she wants. Why would she stay here?"

"To be with you?"

"She can do better than me, Maggie. We both know that."

"I know nothing of the sort, dear. You're a much better person than you give yourself credit for. Sarah knows how special you are."

"No where near as special as she is."

"You're being awfully hard on yourself today. Why is that?"

"Maybe I'm premenstrual."

Maggie blew one of her trademark raspberries. "Come on, Jordan. What's going on with you?"

"I don't know. I feel restless. Fidgety. Like I've got an itch I can't scratch. It's been coming on for a couple of days now and I'm not sure what it is."

"What do you *think* it is?"

"I wish I knew."

Sarah backed quietly away from the door and left the house from the other side. It was wrong to eavesdrop like that, but she thought she might know what Jordan's problem was. Ever since the reception, Jordan had been holding back in bed. Though that wasn't quite right. Jordan was just as attentive and passionate as ever, but there was always a point at which she seemed to physically restrain herself during their love-making. Sarah had a pretty good idea why. Jordan needed to play.

Was she ready? Jordan had her play list and her safe word. Sarah had been expecting Jordan to broach the subject, but nothing had been said. Maybe Sarah needed to be the one to initiate it. That kind of fit with what she'd read in the books. Jordan was consistently cautious about taking power from Sarah. She might *need* Sarah to formally ask to play.

What would she do? Since Jordan had Sarah's list, it was up to Sarah to surrender control and let Jordan do what she wanted. Of course, Sarah had every right to tell Jordan exactly how she wanted the scene to go, but Sarah suspected that it wouldn't be as satisfying for Jordan if she did. At least, not this time.

After throwing up, Sarah's senses seemed to be both numbed and heightened at the same time. Her mind hung in limbo, watching abstractly as she took a shower and braided her hair back. Jordan wasn't the only one who needed this. Sarah could see clearly now that she had been building toward it for some time. Thinking about it wasn't enough anymore.

Maggie was doing the dishes when Sarah stepped into the kitchen. The old woman smiled over her shoulder and then did a double take. "Are you all right?"

Sarah was far away. "Is everyone gone?"

"Yes. You look strange."

"Go home, Maggie."

She seemed torn between finishing the dishes and arguing, but then the fight went out of her. Maggie wiped her hands dry and reached for her coat. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"No. But Jordan does." A feeling of peace settled over her shoulders. "I trust her. Everything will be okay."

Maggie kissed Sarah's cheek and left the house. Breathing in the silence, Sarah committed herself completely to what she was about to do. There would be no turning back. Needing to prove to herself that she was acting of her own volition and not merely in response to Jordan's needs, Sarah stripped down completely. She would go to Jordan naked.

Leaving her clothes folded neatly on a chair, Sarah lifted her chin and strode through the house with confidence. Arousal shot through her like lightning with every step. She was wet and her nipples ached for attention. The sound of a television guided her to one of the living rooms. Sarah stepped inside and waited for Jordan to notice her. The hardening of desire on Jordan's face made her weak and she had trouble shaping words.

"It's time."

Neither of them moved for an eternal moment and then Jordan stood up. Sarah turned and led the way upstairs. When she reached for the dungeon door, Jordan's hand reached over her shoulder to stop her.

"Remind me of your safe word."

Sarah could feel the strength and heat of Jordan at her back and it nearly unhinged her. This was really happening! "Jaguar."

"Don't expect me to keep reminding you that you can stop me. I'm going to do what I want until I'm done or you use your word. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she breathed. Jordan's hand moved and Sarah opened the door.

~***~

All of the hard edges of Jordan's face were gone now. She looked soft and vulnerable and peaceful. Sarah couldn't take her eyes off of her, which wasn't hard as she was curled up in Jordan's lap. She had never felt so boneless and relaxed. "My favorite part?" she repeated thoughtfully. "You. The way you were with me."

"What was it you liked?"

"Well, you're always strong and compelling, but this was different."

"Different how?"

It was hard to put it into words. In fact, speaking at all was arduous. "You *handled* me. Like what I was feeling belonged to you. You made something inside of me and my purpose was to experience it."

"And you liked that?"

"I loved it. I think . . . I've been wanting that since . . . forever. Only I didn't know it."

"Sometimes it happens like that," Jordan said tenderly. "You don't know what's missing until you find it."

Sarah traced Jordan's chin with a finger tip. "It's been happening to me a lot lately."

"It can be very disconcerting."

"Yes."

Jordan ran her hand around the curve of Sarah's cheek. "Tell me another thing you liked."

That was easy. "I liked being tied up. I liked it a lot."

"Can you tell me why?"

Sarah mentally put herself back on the cross. It was the first place Jordan had bound her and Sarah had been shocked at how exciting it was. "Part of it was being helpless. I know I have a safe word, but I really didn't remember that at the time. I felt like I had no control. You could do anything you wanted to me. The other part was that...it made me feel...like I belonged to you. Like you have a *right* to have me like that. And..."

"You're doing fine. Take your time."

Sarah concentrated on what she had felt. "I felt like I had no choice but to enjoy it. Like being tied up gave me permission to just feel." She sighed. "My words don't even come close to what I felt. I just don't know how to verbalize it."

"It's okay, baby. I'm just glad it's something you want."

"Oh yeah," Sarah grinned. "You can tie me up anytime."

Jordan chuckled. "I may take you up on that."

Sarah pulled her down for a brief kiss. "Please do."

"Okay. Now, tell me something you didn't like."

Sarah considered it. "Well, there wasn't anything I didn't like, but I didn't really get the feather thing."

"No?"

She shook her head. "I didn't *hate* it. It just didn't really make me feel anything. Is it supposed to tickle or something?"

Jordan shrugged. "For some people, it does. Others enjoy the torment of being touched so softly when they want more. For me, it's mostly a visual treat. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, it was lovely, but it's not something I'm going to insist on."

"Oh, you can do it. It didn't bother me. I just thought maybe I was supposed to feel more than I did."

"You're only supposed to feel exactly what you feel, baby. Don't start putting expectations on yourself."

"Tell me something *you* liked, Jordan."

With a gentle smile, Jordan laid her head over on her shoulder. "For me, everything was absolutely perfect, but the thing that put me over the edge was when I put my thumb up your ass."

Sarah couldn't help but blush.

"You *loved* that," Jordan smiled.

"I did," she admitted.

"I was afraid you wouldn't, you know."

"It was so intense. It was like you were stimulating my nervous system directly. Why do people talk about that like it's terrible?"

"Maybe for some people, it is."

Sarah closed her eyes to recapture the feeling. "It was like being right on the edge of coming the whole time. I felt frantic for it. Like I was bursting right out of my skin."

"You were incredible, little one. I have never enjoyed anyone more than I did you tonight. It transcended playing on every level. It's never been anything like that for me. I am curious though as to why you picked tonight. The way you came to me . . . I didn't expect that at all."

"You needed it," she said simply. "I think maybe I did, too, but you were hurting for it."

Jordan looked confused. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"I overheard you talking to Maggie in the kitchen. You said you were feeling restless. Like you had an itch you couldn't scratch. I knew right away what it was."

"You did this for me?"

"Yes."

Jordan looked truly anguished. "*Sarah*."

Placing her fingers over Jordan's lips, Sarah spoke from her heart. "You *needed* this. Maybe I needed to know you needed me this way before I could take the last step. You're always so careful not to pressure or influence me. You always put my needs and feelings first. It's wonderful that you do that, but sometimes I wish you wouldn't. Sometimes I need you to tell me how it's going to be or what you want. I *know* I can say no, Jordan. It's like you don't trust me sometimes to stand up for myself. You didn't do anything tonight that I didn't want. That's why I came to you like I did. I didn't want there to be any question about my commitment. Yes, I chose tonight because you needed it, but I needed it, too. Not just this, but feeling like I could do something to take care of you. You're so strong that sometimes I feel like you don't really need me."

"That's not true."

"Maybe not, but sometimes it feels that way. I don't think it's you though. Maybe it's my own insecurities. Maggie says I'm listening to my parents too much. She's probably right. I could never do anything to make them happy or make them love me. They didn't need anything from me or even want anything I had to offer. Most of the time, I don't know what it is that you need or want from me. I spend a lot of time guessing. The way you were with me tonight gave me permission to just *be*. I didn't have to think about what to do. You *made* me what you needed. I think I need more of that. It made me feel safe and . . . whole."

A single tear slowly rolled down Jordan's cheek. "You just don't know what a treasure you are to me."

Sarah caught the tear on her fingers. "Did what I said make sense?"

"You expressed yourself very well, little one. I didn't understand what it was you needed from me. And I think you're right that I haven't trusted your strength. I apologize for that and I'll try to do better in the future."

"Thank you."

Jordan took a deep breath. "Unless I request it of you, don't ever walk through the house naked again. There could have been someone here."

"Maggie said there wasn't."

"Maggie's not in charge."

Sarah smiled at Jordan's shift in attitude. "Point taken."

"Good. You liked it, didn't you? Coming to me naked like that?"

Another blush crept up her neck. "It was exciting."

Jordan smiled. "Excellent. I think I'll make a new rule. When you come down to my rooms, you'll stop at the bottom of the stairs and take off your clothes. I'll put in a shelf and some hooks for your things. You are not allowed to wear clothing of any kind in my rooms."

It seemed like an odd request, but it wasn't anything Sarah had a problem with. "All right."

Jordan's confidence was building. "From now on, when I tell you I love you, I want you to tell me something you love about me. I know it's hard for you to say the words and that's fine. When you do say it, I'll know you really mean it, but I need something back from you when I tell you how I feel. It doesn't have to be something big or profound. Just the first thing that comes to your mind. Can you do that for me?"

It was actually a huge relief. Not being able to force herself to tell Jordan that she loved her had been nagging at her. She was feeling obligated to say it back and it was killing her that she couldn't. Knowing how Jordan wanted her to respond made it much easier. "I can do that."

"I love you."

The first thing that came to mind? "I love how sweet you are with me."

"I love you."

"I love the way you kiss." The kiss Jordan gave her was more comforting than passionate, yet no less fulfilling.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you while you clean up after us," Jordan said gently. "Then we're going to go downstairs, take a long hot bath together and get some sleep. I know it's not very late, but you'll need all the sleep you can get. You'll be sore tomorrow."

Sarah put a hand to one breast. "My nipples are already sore from the clamps. They're throbbing."

"That will probably last through tomorrow. They'll toughen up in time."

"I'm not sure I want them to," she admitted.

Jordan grinned. "Then I'll see to it that they don't."

~***~

"I'm going to be a little late tonight," Sarah said as she pulled her shirt over her head. "I have to stop at the lawyer's office. She said something about an offer that we should go over."

"How much is it?" Jordan asked from the bed.

"I don't know. If it pays all the hospital bills and lets me buy a car, I'll be happy."

"I'll sell you the Jag for a thousand."

Sarah knelt to look under her bed for her other shoe. "It's worth more than that."

"Cirenio can't get the smell out."

Looking over the mattress at her lover, Sarah thought it over. "Are you serious?"

Jordan stretched and folded her hands under her head. "A thousand bucks and it's yours."

A two year old Jaguar sedan for a thousand dollars? Just because it smelled funny? How hard was it to buy one of those scented trees? "Let me think it over for a couple of days."

"On one condition."

"Here it comes," Sarah mumbled.

"You have to park it in the garage. It won't do to ruin the paint job by leaving it outside."

That didn't sound so bad. "Okay." Finding her shoe, she crawled up on the bed to put them on. "I'm going to invite my study group to come over tomorrow afternoon. Probably about three. Saturday is the best day for everyone to get together for a longer period."

"Do I get to meet my competition?"

Sarah snorted. "Don't even go there. You *have* no competition and you know it."

"True."

She sounded so smug. Sarah reached over and tweaked a nipple, eliciting a twitch and a grin. "Do you *want* to meet them?"

"Yes. But I don't have to if it will make you uncomfortable."

She finished tying her shoes and crawled over to lay on Jordan. "I don't mind if you meet them, but I'm not sure how to introduce you."

"Let's start with boss and go from there."

Sarah bit her lip. "But that sounds so impersonal. I don't want you to feel like I'm embarrassed by you."

Jordan put a hand to Sarah's hair in a soft caress. "I'll tell you what. I'll show up about five with pizzas and we'll wing it. I'll let you introduce me however you feel most comfortable at the time and I promise not to be offended. No matter what happens, I'll just picture you naked and bound to the cross. That's all the truth I need."

Sarah kissed Jordan hungrily. "It's been over a week. When are we going to do that again?"

"Soon, baby. First, I want you to come to the party on Sunday night. There will only be ten or fifteen people there so I'll be able to give you more attention."

Her heart quickened and her skin tingled. "What do I do?"

"Just follow my lead. Now, you'd better get going or I'm not going to let you leave."

Sarah glanced over at the clock. "I've got ten minutes. I'll bet I can make you come in that time."

Jordan smiled lazily. "You're welcome to try."

She did it in eight and Jordan was sleeping when she left. The image of her satisfied lover sleeping in her bed made the whole day seem brighter. Her classes were interesting and her study group acted like they'd been invited to the White House at her invitation. Everything was great until she got to the lawyer's office.

Later, she couldn't remember driving home. One minute she had been in the mahogany furnished office and the next she was sitting at her dining table. How she got from one place to the other was a complete mystery. Sarah didn't know whether to throw up or pass out.

After the hospital bills, the lawyer's cut, the expense of the rental car and the estimated taxes, she was going to have somewhere in the neighborhood of \$300,000. That didn't seem like a lot considering that the case was being settled for three-quarters of a million dollars, but it was still an extraordinary amount of money. It seemed like far too much money for something that had done so little actual damage to her. It didn't seem fair somehow.

The lawyer had been quite proud of herself, but Sarah just felt sick. She was smart enough to realize that she now had all the capital she could wish for when she decided to start her business- whatever that was going to be. For that matter, she could buy an existing business and try her hand at running it. Or, if she was careful, she could do nothing and live off the money for years. Hell, she could live like a queen forever in Mexico. She could buy a house and never have to pay rent again. She could invest it or buy T-Bills or roll around naked in it.

She had worked so long and hard to achieve a single goal that having the means to realize any number of dreams just fall into her lap was scaring her silly. The plan had been to work and save money over a number of years. That wasn't necessary anymore and she didn't know how to

handle it. The plan would have to change, but how? Now that she had financial security, what did she want? How did she want her life to change?

Sarah realized in a moment of clarity that she didn't want her life to change. The way it was *right now* was better than anything she had ever imagined for herself. Sure, when she graduated she would go looking for a job in her field, but a job would just replace the time she now spent on classes and study. Nothing else had to change. She could keep on working for Jordan and living on the estate. Cleaning the dungeon felt more like a hobby than an actual job anyway. In fact, if Jordan would let her stay, she would clean it for free. She didn't need the money; especially since she lived largely off the tips already. Most of her paychecks went into the bank and stayed there.

Things started to click into place and her fear of the money vanished. She would open a savings account and put the money in it. It could sit there and draw interest until she decided what she wanted to do with it. Regardless of whether or not she deserved it, it was hers. It would be a mistake to think of it as anything other than a tool. A *fabulous* tool, yes, but only a tool. When she figured out how best to use it, she would build something with it.

Now that she felt better, Sarah glanced at the clock. The players would start to arrive in an hour and a half. If she wanted to see Jordan, she would probably have to go up to the estate. Sarah changed her clothes and grabbed her pack on impulse. Maybe tonight she would stay in Jordan's room. Most of the time, Jordan came to Sarah's cottage. If it was all right with Jordan, this would make a nice change for both of them. She had to be up at the house early to work anyway.

This was only the third time Sarah had been in Jordan's rooms since the new rule had been set. As instructed, Sarah stopped at the bottom of the stairs and took off her clothes. Leaving her pack under her neatly folded clothing, she entered the apartment. It was exciting to be naked here. In part because she was naked, but mostly because she was choosing to follow an order. Obeying gave Jordan power and for reasons she didn't fully understand, Sarah found that highly arousing.

Jordan was just getting out of the shower. Sarah smiled at the towel around Jordan's slender waist. It was exactly the way a man wore a towel. Women wore it under their armpits, but Jordan didn't. It was strangely endearing. "Hi there."

"Hey," Jordan replied with a possessive look at Sarah's nudity. "Didn't think I would get to see you. How did it go?"

"Pretty well. Is it all right with you if I stay down here tonight?"

Jordan brushed water out of her eyes and leaned over to give Sarah a kiss on the cheek. "Of course. I'd like that."

"I brought my books so I could study."

"That's fine."

It occurred to her that she had never seen Jordan get ready for one of the parties. Now she was curious. "May I watch you dress?"

A grin tugged at the corner of Jordan's mouth. "Sure."

Sarah put the lid down on the toilet and sat down. True to form, Jordan let herself air dry as she worked on her hair. Jordan was quite vain about her hair. As far as Sarah could see, it wasn't at all unmanageable, but Jordan took pains with it. Somehow that vanity made Jordan more human and less a super hero. Jordan brushed her teeth, splashed on some scent and dropped her towel on the floor. Sarah picked it up and put it over the shower door before following Jordan into the bedroom.

The mingled scents of leather and cedar in the walk-in closet surrounded Sarah like a blanket. For her, they would always be associated with Jordan.

"Would you like to dress me?" Jordan asked.

Sarah's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

"Sure. We'll start with my cock."

The harsh word was a bit of a shock. They never talked about it even though it was as much a part of Jordan as the color of her eyes. For all Sarah's talk about accepting the man in Jordan, she had not explored this part of her lover. Maybe it was time.

"Choose a harness for me, little one."

They were hanging next to Jordan's ties. Sarah didn't even know which one was Jordan's favorite. All she knew for sure was that Jordan liked black leather. Choosing one that was familiar to her and looked simple to put on, Sarah slowly knelt in front of Jordan and held it for her. A hand rested on the top of her head for balance as Jordan stepped into it. Working from the memory of how it should look around Jordan's hips, Sarah eased it into place and secured it. "Is that right?"

"Perfect."

Jordan had quite a private collection of dildos. Some were just vague shapes that would fit into her BVD's, but most were quite functional. Sarah opened several drawers, trying to decide which one would be best. In the end, she picked the one that was hardest for her to appreciate. Eight inches long, it looked like a real penis. Not that Sarah had ever seen one in the flesh, but she'd seen pictures. This was a *man's* penis. If the whole point was to make Jordan a man, then Sarah wanted her to be the very best one. And really, what difference did it make what it looked like? Ultimately, it was just a chunk of latex with a nice paint job. Sooner or later, it would end up in the dishwasher.

Sarah reached for the harness and slid the dildo into place. It occurred to her that Jordan didn't

look strange wearing the toy. Sarah frequently saw her taking one off and putting one on, but she had never really given it much thought. "What does it feel like to wear this all the time?"

"I'm not really aware of it all that much. It was uncomfortable at first, but I've become accustomed to it over time."

Sarah put her hand around it. She handled dildos all the time, but this was different. This was a part of Jordan; a part she accepted but didn't explore. Turning her grasp into an experimental caress, she heard a hitch in Jordan's breathing. Sarah looked up into the smoldering gaze. "You can feel this?"

"After a fashion."

"How?" Jordan's hand closed around Sarah's and began to move the device against her groin. There was something erotically alien about it that quickened her.

"The base moves against my clitoris," Jordan said in a husky voice, "but part of it is visual. Seeing you touch me like this is very arousing."

Jordan's hand left hers and Sarah continued the motion. "I've been ignoring this part of you."

"I know. It's all right."

"I'm still a little scared of it," she admitted, "but I'll try to do better."

"I know you will. Being a lesbian makes this doubly difficult for you, but I'm not in any hurry. We'll go at whatever speed feels right to you. There's no rush."

Silently promising herself to pay more attention to Jordan's masculine side, Sarah helped her into the vest that hid her breasts and gave her bulk. Of all the things Jordan wore, Sarah hated the vest the most. The strap-on was an addition. The vest took part of Jordan away. She understood the necessity, but resented it.

After the vest, Sarah chose a tight pair of black leather slacks. She liked the way they hugged Jordan's ass and made her legs look so long. Kneeling on the floor, she dressed Jordan's feet in socks and boots. It was almost like having her very own living doll to play dress up with, even if it was awkward.

That done, she began to look for a shirt. There were so many to choose from. "What do you usually wear?"

"You're doing just fine, baby. Keep going."

Sarah pictured the dungeon in her mind and looked for something that would fit in. Jordan was the Dungeon Master. She not only had to be in control of the players, she should also be as intimidating as the room itself. Sarah found a shirt that could do that. It was a fine silk in a red so

dark it was nearly black. Only as it moved under the light did the red come out. It was deliciously sinister and felt like a whisper on her skin. She liked it even better on Jordan. Sarah buttoned it up and meticulously tucked it into the pants before fastening them. "I feel like a squire readying her knight for battle."

"Or a slave dressing her Master."

The truth of that gave her pause. "I'm not your slave."

"I know. Just indulging in a little fantasy."

Sarah loosened the silk shirt in Jordan's pants so she would have room to move. Her mind was turning the situation over carefully. Here she was, naked, and dressing Jordan like a body servant would. It was probably natural for Jordan to have such a fantasy. In fact, if she was honest with herself, she was having a bit of that fantasy herself. After all, what was a squire, really, but a body servant? If she could appreciate the one, why not the other? It's not like she wasn't in control of what was happening. It had been her choice to come down to Jordan's rooms and take her clothes off. Jordan had asked if Sarah wanted to dress her. If it was all Sarah's choice, then she could choose to be okay with it.

Stepping back, she studied her creation. Jordan looked hot, but unfinished. That collar begged for a tie. None of Jordan's ties really worked with it though. Then she found several bolo ties. One of them had a red and black emblem that looked like a yin/yang symbol except that it had three sections instead of two. "Does this mean something?"

"It's the symbol for the BDSM lifestyle," Jordan answered.

"Perfect." Sarah slipped it around Jordan's neck and arranged it under the collar. Snugging it up and centering it, she let her hands slide down the now smooth chest. "I love this shirt on you."

"I'll have to remember that."

She thought of something else. "You need a belt." Sarah chose a braided leather belt that matched the tiny braids of the bolo and ran it through the loops. Jordan waited patiently as Sarah buckled it. "There. That's better. Now you look ready."

Jordan turned to the mirror and studied herself. Straightening her collar, she looked at Sarah through her reflection. "Very nice. Thank you."

Sarah warmed at the compliment. "You're welcome." She warmed even more as Jordan's arms embraced her and held her close.

"I'm going to go crazy," Jordan whispered fervently. "Thinking about you waiting for me down here while they play their silly games. So soft and warm and sexy. I love you so much."

Sarah's desire hardened at the words; her body suddenly painfully sensitive to the twin feelings

of silk and leather along her length. She knew she was supposed to tell Jordan something in return, but the ability to speak was lost to the demands of her passion. She felt ravenous for Jordan's kiss and eagerly sucked at the knowledgeable mouth. There was something about being naked when Jordan wasn't that just sent her over the edge. It wasn't the first time she had been aware of it. In fact, it was how she felt when Jordan bound her in the dungeon. It was an urgent, tingling, needy feeling that filled her up and begged desperately for more.

"I have to go."

Sarah buried her face in Jordan's neck at the regretful words. "I wish . . ."

"I'm sorry, baby. I really am. I'll make it up to you."

With a last slow grind of her hips against leather, Sarah eased back. "It's okay."

Jordan followed with nibbling kisses and soft touches. "I hate doing this to you. Making you all hot and wet only to have to leave."

Still aching with need, Sarah did feel a little bit better. "Will you wake me up?"

"You can count on it."

She nodded, her hands smoothing the expensive fabric over Jordan's chest. "Have a good time, okay?"

"Are you kidding?" Jordan looked shocked. "It's going to be agony. Every minute is going to feel like a year in hell. All I'm going to be able to think about is making you come. Ah, the hell with it."

Sarah didn't even have time to gasp as she was lifted and Jordan's body pressed her firmly against the wall. She groaned into Jordan's searing kiss as her legs were lifted to circle the slim waist and Jordan began thrusting against her. The firm bulge behind the leather of Jordan's pants was stroking her clitoris and the silk of the dark shirt felt like sandpaper on her nipples. Grasping at the dark head, Sarah put her head back with a tormented moan of need. Sharp teeth nipped at her throat. Tightening her legs for leverage, Sarah found the counterpoint to Jordan's thrusting hips with her own. Hands covered her breasts roughly and she cried out at the exquisite pleasure of having her nipples massaged.

It was so fast. Almost before she was ready, her orgasm ripped through her. She was only out of touch for a moment and then she was fully cognizant of Jordan's need. The strong woman was moaning freely, her entire body straining into Sarah. Still enjoying the echoes of her own numbing pleasure, Sarah continued to writhe against her lover. "I want you to come," she pleaded in a near growl that almost shocked her.

Jordan responded to her voice with a groan and Sarah licked her lips as she separated herself from her pride. Tangling her fingers in Jordan's short hair, she demanded, "Fuck me, Master."

The dominating woman came moments later with a shuddering howl and Sarah knew she had never heard anything so sweet. Keeping her legs tightly scissored, she relaxed her arms and combed her fingers through the tousled hair. "I've messed you all up."

Jordan chuckled as her hands slid beneath Sarah's hips to hold her up. "Girl, all you have to do is look at me and I get messed up inside. You're amazing."

Sarah giggled and held on as Jordan lifted her away from the wall.

"Grab those, would you?"

Following the tilt of Jordan's chin, Sarah picked up leather gloves from the dresser top. Walking made her clit rock over the slick leather and she bit back a gasp as passion began to grow again. Jordan was going to leave in a short time and Sarah already missed her. Laying her head on the sturdy shoulder, she hugged her hard.

"Oh, baby," Jordan crooned. "I wish I didn't have to leave, but I'm not going very far and I'll hurry back to make love to you properly. Will you be all right here alone?"

Sarah nodded. She wasn't at all sure she would be able to let go. Jordan stopped at the door leading upstairs and simply stood there, holding Sarah tight. Sarah felt like ivy clinging to a wall. Several minutes passed before she was able to lower her feet to the floor, but Jordan didn't let go and it made her feel a little less lost and helpless. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, little one. Being with you is the greatest honor and privilege of my life. Letting you go is torture."

Sarah smiled through the tears in her eyes. "You always say the nicest things."

Jordan kissed her thoroughly, pulled on her gloves and then she was gone.

~***~

The looks of awe and jealousy on the faces of her study group was quite satisfying. "This is yours?" Lisa asked.

"Yep. Come on in."

Bonnie walked backwards through the door, her eyes on her memory of driving by the big house. "That's the biggest house I've ever seen. It's a *mansion*. You clean that?"

"Parts of it."

"Can we get a tour?"

Sarah had been afraid of that. "I don't think so. It would be inappropriate. After all, that's where my boss lives."

"This is a great house," Janet said with approval. "I thought you said it was a cottage."

Sarah closed the door and began taking coats to hang in the closet. "Well, compared to the big house, it is. My boss calls it a cottage and I've gotten used to thinking of it that way. Do you guys want coffee? I've already got it going, but I've also got juice and sodas."

The girls didn't even ask if they could look around. They wandered into her bedroom as if they had a right to be there. Sarah was very uncomfortable with that, but figured they would get it out of their systems and settle down. She forced herself to go into the kitchen and set their drinks out while they looked around, thankful that she had taken the time to clean up and make sure there was nothing incriminating lying out where they could see it.

Tamar was the first to return to the kitchen. "Thanks for letting us come out here. It's nice to get away from school for a while. Even if we are going to study."

Sarah kind of liked Tamar. She tended to be quiet, but she was focused and more mature than the others. Tamar was taking business classes so she could go into corporate law. The choice made her unpopular with her traditional Jewish family, but it made Sarah respect her more. It had to be hard to go against your family's wishes like that and probably accounted for Tamar's maturity. "I'm glad you came. Do you want anything in your coffee?"

"Milk, please."

Sarah set out milk, cream and sugar on the counter as the other girls joined them.

Lisa was grinning. "So, does your boss need anyone else to work for him?"

"I don't think so."

"Too bad. I'd love to have a set up like this. Does he pay well?"

"I do all right," Sarah hedged.

"What's his wife like?"

She had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Um . . . there's no wife."

Bonnie leaned on the counter with a glint in her eye. "Is he cute?"

It was an impossible situation. Sarah wanted to claim their relationship there and then. Anything to keep these girls from lusting after Jordan. But she just couldn't do it. She couldn't bear the questions and the teasing she was sure to get. Sarah could feel the cowardice in the marrow of her bones and it made her feel lower than dirt.

"I don't care if he's cute," Lisa laughed. "If he's old, I'll take him. As long as he puts me in the will."

Tamar was the only one who didn't laugh. A look of disgust passed between them and Sarah decided that she did want to know her better. Having an ally, even if she didn't know what was going on, gave Sarah courage. Lifting her chin, she spoke firmly. "He's not old and he's one of the nicest people I've ever met. In fact, when he heard you all were coming, he volunteered to bring us pizza in a couple of hours. You'll get a chance to see him for yourselves. I suggest we get to work and see how much ground we can cover before he gets here. Bonnie, you wanted to present your business plan and see if we could find areas of improvement? I'd like to do that as well."

Tamar nodded. "If we have time, I'd like to go over yesterday's finance class. Professor Moore just confuses me."

The others seemed to understand that they had embarrassed themselves and the five of them sat down at the dining room table with no further comment on Jordan's availability. Sarah felt better in her element and had no trouble getting them all to focus.

They spent the first hour rehashing the finance class. Professor Moore *was* a tad confusing. If you read ahead and concentrated, he wasn't too bad, but he expected his students to have the basics down. He wasn't good at making sure everyone was on the same page. Between the five of them, they got his lecture sorted out and even did some prep for the next class.

Bonnie stood up to present her plan. It sounded pretty naive to Sarah. Bonnie seemed to be under the impression that all she had to do was open the doors to her little book store/coffee shop and customers would be flocking in. She didn't seem to have any of it figured out. All she really had was an idea. It was pretty far into the semester to be so unprepared. Sarah had been expecting numbers, not decor.

Tamar was the first to venture a question. "Um . . . What's your overhead?" The blank look on Bonnie's face prompted her to add, "You know, how much daily business do you have to turn to cover your expenses?"

Bonnie shuffled through her papers and found the one she was looking for. "Mostly, I've just got the start-up figured out. You know, what it's going to cost to get the place set up and the equipment I'll need. I'm working on the inventory stuff now."

Sarah leaned over to look at the paper Tamar was studying. It was pathetic. Bonnie was scribbling about how much to spend on art and paint, for crying out loud. She even had the color scheme set out. Sarah suddenly realized that Bonnie was not cut out to be a business woman. Maybe a mid-level office manager if she ever grew up, but nothing more. It shocked her to the core and left her speechless.

"This is all well and good," Tamar said slowly, "but is this what your advisor wants?"

Bonnie sat down with a sigh. "All he ever talks about is projections and market curves and supply and demand and taking it to the next level. *This* is what I'm good at. I could make a great business. The kind of place where people feel comfortable. The kind of place where they want to come. I just want to build it, not run it."

Sarah could see the crestfallen look in Bonnie's eyes and she got an idea. "Maybe you're going about this in the wrong way."

"What do you mean?"

Taking the paper from Tamar's hands, Sarah held it up. "If this is what you're good at, why not make *it* your business plan?"

"I don't understand."

"If you don't want to run a coffee shop, why are you writing your plan on one? If what you like to do is design, then write about that. All you have to do is figure out how much you want to make and whether or not you want to hire contractors or employees. If you start as a home-based business, your overhead will be minimal and you'll get some nifty tax breaks in the bargain. The customer pays for everything. You won't have to figure out inventory or equipment. Especially if you go with contractors."

Sarah wadded up the worthless paper and tossed it over her shoulder. She could see that she had Bonnie's attention. "You're going to have to start over. Let's brainstorm what you need to find out."

Bonnie wrote down their questions and ideas as fast as they came. Sarah thought if she could just focus long enough to get the answers, she would have a paper worth turning in. She certainly seemed more confident in the new direction her project was taking.

The knock on the door took Sarah unaware. She had been so involved in getting Bonnie's mess straightened out that she had forgotten all about Jordan coming. Her stomach immediately tied itself in a knot. "That must be the pizza," she said with a weak smile. Her knees shook as she went to the door.

Jordan had four pizzas balanced on one hand, a case of cokes in the other and a smile. "How's my timing?"

The smile made Sarah feel marginally better. "Pretty good. Come on in."

Closing the door behind her lover, Sarah turned and saw the awestruck looks on her classmates. Jordan went straight to the kitchen and put the food and drinks on the counter. "Howdy all. Thought you might need some brain food right about now. Lord knows it got me through college."

For a long moment, no one said anything and Sarah realized that it was up to her to make the introductions. It was the moment of truth and Jordan looked perfectly at ease with anything that should come out of her mouth. "Uh . . . Jordan, this is Janet, Bonnie, Tamar and Lisa. Ladies, this is my boss . . . and my best friend. Jordan Crisp."

She hadn't been sure what was going to come out of her mouth until it had. It felt like exactly the right thing to say and the smile in Jordan's eyes was approving. Sarah relaxed as Jordan shook hands around the table.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you," Lisa said in a syrupy voice. "Sarah says such nice things about you. You're awfully sweet to bring us pizza. Will you stay and have some with us?"

Sarah wanted to scratch her eyes out and set her hair on fire.

"I'm afraid I can only stay for a few minutes," Jordan said easily as she took her hand back. "I have an engagement this evening to prepare for. It was not my intention to interrupt your studies."

Sarah suddenly didn't want her to leave. "You brought enough pizza to feed an army. At least stay long enough to help us eat some of it."

Jordan turned her back on the girls and smiled a secret smile just for Sarah. "Since you asked so nicely, I will."

Setting out plates and napkins, Sarah kept an eye on Jordan as the girls gathered around the counter. Sure enough, Lisa managed to put herself at Jordan's elbow. Sarah had a strong desire to find out if Lisa could fly if she had a broom stuck up her ass.

"So, *Jordan*, what was your major in college?"

Jordan never even looked at Lisa. "History." She pulled two slices of the combo pizza onto her plate and stepped back.

"I *love* history," Lisa oozed. "It's so fascinating."

Tamar rolled her eyes and held her plate towards Sarah. "Would you toss a piece of the veggie on here?"

"Sure." Sarah gave her a big slice and then took one for herself. "Does anyone want ice for their coke?" No one did and Sarah leaned back against the counter to watch. She felt like she was in the middle of a disaster film. Everything seemed okay at the moment, but any second now, all hell was going to break loose. It made her want to giggle.

"Are all of you business majors?" Jordan asked.

"I am," Lisa announced. "I think it's important for women to understand the world that men live

in. Maybe if more women took an interest in corporate America and the economy, men wouldn't be under so much stress. A man should be able to come home from the office and relax. I think understanding what a man does all day makes a woman more helpful as a mate."

Sarah nearly inhaled a chunk of bell pepper. This was news to everyone. Lisa talked all the time about opening a chain of tanning salons. Catering to the needs of a man like a 1950's housewife was never in any agenda she ever talked about.

"I'd love to get your perspective on that some time."

Jordan looked like she was trying to understand a foreign language. After a moment of silence, she made a thoughtful noise in her chest and turned to Janet. "And you?"

"My dad owns a hardware store," Janet said. "I worked for him all through high school and during the summers since. He promised if I got a business degree, he'd open up a second store and let me manage it. He's planning to do it anyway, but it's pretty cool that he's willing to wait for me and give me a chance. Of course, I think I'll gear mine more towards the yard and garden crowd once it gets on its feet."

"Sounds like your dad is pretty proud of you," Jordan nodded. "Good luck with it." She looked at Bonnie. "What about you?"

"Definitely business, but I'm not sure yet how I'll use it. I've got some ideas, but nothing firm."

"Nothing wrong with that," Jordan conceded.

"I'm pre-law," Tamar volunteered. "Specifically, corporate law."

"Hmm. Why corporate?"

Tamar shrugged. "Money. Power. Prestige."

Jordan chuckled. "An honest answer. I can respect that."

Lisa sidled up to Jordan. "What do *you* do, Jordan?"

She took a big bite and grinned around it. "Pizza delivery. The tips are great."

Apparently, Lisa thought this was the funniest thing she'd ever heard and it gave her a reason to put a fluttering hand on Jordan's arm. Before Sarah could kill her, Jordan stepped forward to pick up a napkin and moved to stand next to Sarah, putting her out of Lisa's reach. It was very casually done, but it meant everything to Sarah.

"No, really," Lisa persisted as she closed in again. "What kind of work do you do?"

Sarah set her plate aside in anticipation. If Lisa made one more attempt to touch Jordan, Sarah

was going to choke her to death with her own intestines.

"I'm a research scientist," Jordan lied casually. "I'm trying to find a cure for leprosy."

Surprised at the lie, Sarah glanced up at her just as Jordan reached back to scratch vigorously at the nape of her neck. It was just too funny and she burst out laughing at the frozen looks on her study group.

"What?" Jordan asked innocently.

"Leprosy? Good one." Sarah was still laughing as she stepped forward and gently, but firmly, pushed Lisa out of the kitchen. "Cool your jets, Lisa."

Lisa gaped in feigned innocence. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Sarah wasn't afraid anymore. "Back off," she said with what she hoped was a dangerous smile, "or I'll rip your arm off and shove it up your ass. He's taken." The utter shock in Lisa's eyes was supremely satisfying.

"But . . .you? I thought . . . Aren't you gay?"

Sarah folded her arms. "Usually. What's your point?"

Lisa still looked like something big had fallen on her head. "You're sleeping with your boss?"

Jordan snorted. "Sleeping?"

Sarah threw a warning look over her shoulder.

Jordan gave her an amused thumbs up. "Sorry. You're doing great, babe. Keep it up."

Shifting her hands to her hips, Sarah faced Lisa again. "Are we clear?"

Lisa took a step back and held up a hand. "Sure. No problem. I didn't mean to poach. If you'd just said something . . ."

"I'm saying it now." Sarah looked at the other girls. Tamar was trying to hide a grin behind her napkin. "Anybody have a problem with that?"

"Nope," Janet said as heads shook. "No problem at all."

"Good." No one said a word as Sarah retrieved her pizza and reclaimed her spot next to Jordan.

"Actually," the older woman said to break the silence, "I'm primarily involved in community projects right now."

Tamar nodded. "Anything we might have heard of?"

Jordan shifted to cross one leg over another, incidentally leaning against Sarah. "Well, I'm marginally involved with the Downtown Revitalization Project and the local Battered Women's Shelter, but the thing I'm excited about right now is an idea Sarah came up with a couple of months ago. I've got a rather large circle of friends and we're looking to get involved with helping people on a more personal level. It's all well and good to throw money at problems, but not every one has money to throw. Besides which, money by itself doesn't fix things and a lot of that money ends up greasing the wrong palms. Most things that need doing need people willing to get their hands dirty."

"What kind of things are you hoping to accomplish?"

"Finding projects is the easy part. Setting the priorities and getting approval from the city is where it gets tough. It's one thing to volunteer to clean and paint the youth center and quite another to get permission to actually do it. Everyone gets a little territorial when you offer to do for free what they're hoping to get paid for. Until we get that sort of thing approved, we're talking about regular blood drives and picking up trash in the parks. Did you know you can't just go out and randomly clean alongside the highway?"

Sarah frowned. "Why not?"

"Beats the hell out of me. You've got to apply for a specific stretch of road and then they want to put up a sign staking your claim. Of course, if you go that route, they want you to do it on a regular schedule and they'll hound you if you don't. It's no wonder more people don't volunteer with it being so hard to do. Maybe I'm naive, but I thought the city would be bending over backwards to accommodate an army of volunteers. Instead, they're throwing up roadblocks left and right. It's frustrating."

They had not talked about the players volunteering since the subject had first been broached. Sarah had been under the impression that Jordan had lost interest in it. She was surprised to learn that Jordan had been following it up. "How many people want to do it?"

"A hundred and twenty-seven."

"So many?"

Jordan smiled. "Cool beans, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Remind me to fill you in later." Jordan glanced at her watch. "I really should go. I've got a few things to take care of before my meeting. Everything cool here?"

Sarah nodded. "Thanks for bringing us dinner."

"Anytime, babe." Jordan wrapped another slice of pizza in a napkin and leaned over to kiss Sarah with a brief touch of her lips. "You rock," she whispered.

Sarah was blushing as Jordan said her good-byes and left the cottage. Four sets of eyes swivelled to her as soon as the front door closed.

"*Oh . . . My . . . God.*" Bonnie fanned herself with one hand. "Does he have a brother? A cousin? Hell, I ain't picky. Does he have a dog? What a hunk!"

"He seems really nice," Tamar said.

Sarah smiled at her. "He really is."

"Those eyes," Janet sighed. "He's gorgeous, Sarah."

"*Rip my arm off and shove it up my ass?*"

Uh oh. Lisa did not look happy. Sarah's belly rolled over and tied itself in a knot.

"Is it *my* fault that I didn't know you were boinking your boss? If you'd just told us up front, I never would have made a play for him. Did you have to embarrass me like that in front of him?"

Tamar snickered. "I think *you* did a better job of that than Sarah did."

"Bite me." Lisa all but tossed her plate on the table. "Why didn't you just tell us instead of jumping down my throat like that? You embarrassed me. Some friend you turned out to be."

"Are we friends?" It was an honest question, but it sounded harsher than she intended. "I mean, I know we're friendly, but do you consider us *friends*?"

Lisa made a noise of affront. "Well, I did until you said that. Jesus, Sarah. We've been hanging out for months."

"We don't hang out, Lisa. We study together. We're more like co-workers than friends. I was under no obligation to tell you about my relationship with Jordan. That's a private thing between the two of us and none of your concern. The only reason you know now is because you forced my hand."

"Excuse me? Now it's my fault that I've been humiliated?"

Sarah's nerves settled. She had every right to be upset and she wouldn't allow Lisa to make her feel small and petty. This was *her* house and Jordan was *her* boyfriend. "You would have stood a better chance if you'd just been yourself, you know. Jordan isn't some stupid frat boy who keeps his brain in his pants."

"Oh. So now you're going to lecture me about how to catch a man? That's rich. A *lesbian* is

giving me pointers. What do *you* know about men?"

"Well," Tamar drawled, "she caught Mr. Dreamboat."

Lisa glared at Tamar. "*You* stay out of this." She turned back to Sarah with flashing eyes. "You're nothing but a feather in his cap. *Every* man wants a shot at a lesbian. It's an ego boost. He's probably bragging to his friends about doing you. Sooner or later, he'll bring home another woman and ask if he can watch the two of you doing it. You're nothing but the little mistress he's keeping in this cottage, Sarah. You're a toy."

Nothing Lisa was saying had any truth in it. Jordan wasn't like that. Not just because she wasn't really a man, but because it just wasn't in Jordan's nature. But it still hurt. It touched on all of the insecurities Sarah worked so hard to deny. The hairy ones that came out to play when she was alone. She had only one defense. "He loves me."

Lisa laughed cruelly. "Of course he does. They *all* say they love you. They'll say anything-*do* anything-to get into your pants. If you knew anything at all about men, you would know that. He's using you and you're too clueless to see it. You can't possibly think that he intends to marry you and make you the lady of this estate. Please tell me you aren't that gullible." Looking smug and self-satisfied, Lisa folded her arms. "Maybe you are. You'd have been better off sticking to women and leaving the men to us. I hope I'm around to see it when he dumps you."

Sarah was shocked by the deliberate attack. Lisa was *trying* to hurt her. She *intended* to cause Sarah pain. Such calculated vindictiveness cut right through Sarah's shields and neatly eviscerated her heart. *This* was why she hadn't told them up front. Her feelings for Jordan made her feel so vulnerable and raw anyway. Telling people about it was like giving them a knife to use against her. All she could do was stand there as tears streamed down her face.

"Poor little Sarah," Lisa mocked. "You are so out of your league."

"Shut up," Tamar said. "You're such a bitch, Lisa. You made a complete ass of yourself and now you're taking it out on Sarah. That's fucked up."

Lisa rounded on Tamar. "You know what? You can kiss my ass. I only let you into my study group as a favor anyway."

"*Your* study group?" Tamar looked truly amused. "I think we all know it's Sarah's study group. She's the one doing *us* a favor. It's pretty clear to me that she doesn't need our help to do well in school."

"Fine," Lisa huffed as she reached for her back pack. "You can stay here with the lesbo. Maybe you can be the other woman for her *boyfriend*. The rest of us are out of here."

"Good riddance to you," Tamar laughed.

Desperate to retain at least some dignity, Sarah wiped her tears away. This whole scene was out

of some bad movie and she would be glad when it was over. "I'll give you a ride, Tamar."

"Thanks."

"Um . . ." Janet was waffling, her eyes giving away the fact that she wasn't sure which way to jump. "School is important to me. I need this group. Can't we just work this out?"

Lisa looked for a moment like she had been sucker punched. Then she straightened. "Bonnie and I are leaving. You can come with us or you can stay here with the dykes. You choose. But, if you stay, you're not my friend."

Janet paled noticeably. "What are you saying?"

"I'm pretty sure I said it. What's it going to be?"

No one moved or made a sound while Janet worked it out. "Well, since my whole future is on the line, I guess I'm staying." Her eyes shifted to Sarah hopefully. "If that's all right with you?"

Sarah could hardly believe it. Half of the group was choosing her over Lisa. Janet was even giving up a friendship to do it and Lisa looked like she was going to spit nails over it. "It's okay with me," she smiled tenuously.

"Great," Janet smiled in relief.

"Come on, Bonnie. Let's get out of here."

Her heart still felt like it had been tap danced on, but Sarah pulled herself together. There would be time later to examine the wounds. For now, she had company. Heck, maybe she even had some friends. It was still hard to believe that these two had seen her as more essential than Lisa. Not that Lisa was really all that great a prize with her mediocre intelligence and shallow values, but people didn't choose Sarah so often that she could take it casually. It had been an ugly encounter, but maybe a little miracle had come out of it.

As soon as the door closed behind Lisa and her sidekick, Tamar threw out a hip and flipped her hair back. "*Oh, Jordan. I looove history! It's sooo fascinating!*"

The tone of voice and the way she flounced around made Sarah dissolve with laughter.

"*Don't you think I'm pretty?*" Tamar was fawning over Janet as a surrogate for Jordan. "*I know! You can screw me and I'll spend all your money. Doesn't that sound like fun?*"

Sarah held onto the counter for support as all three of them laughed hysterically. All of the tension and drama of a few minutes before was washed away.

"She is *such* a Barbie," Tamar continued in her own voice. "What the hell was she talking about with understanding men and stress? Did she really expect that to accomplish anything?"

Sarah used a napkin to dry her merry tears. "I don't know, but did you see the look on Jordan's face?"

Janet grimaced. "If he'd looked at me like that, I'd be hitch-hiking to Tibet to search for inner peace."

Sarah pulled her hair back and took a cleansing breath. "I'm sorry about that whole thing. I had no idea it would get out of hand like that. Jordan just wanted to meet everyone and I thought it would be okay."

Tamar was grinning ear to ear. "I so wanted to see you kick her ass."

"Oh, God," Sarah groaned. "I can't believe I acted like that."

"You were great," Janet said. "If she'd been putting those pathetic moves on my boyfriend, I'd have snatched her bald."

Sarah looked at Janet with regret. "I'm sorry you lost a friendship."

Janet huffed in dismissal. "If we were friends, it was in Lisa's mind. It's just like you said: we were friendly. Not friends. I only asked if I could join the group because you were in it. Everyone said you were the best." She shrugged. "I didn't expect to like you, too."

"Same here," Tamar added. "I thought you'd be a tight ass, but you've got a great sense of humor and you're smart as hell. Speaking of which, what the heck was that disaster Bonnie called a plan? How on God's green earth did she get to be a senior if that's the best she could do? Where is that paper?"

They liked her. Sarah could hardly credit her luck. She joined them over the crumpled paper to laugh about Bonnie's underdeveloped scheme and her heart was light and free.

[Continued...](#)

[BadSquirrel's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just

wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Five

Sarah looked at herself in the mirror doubtfully. She was wearing one of Jordan's white silk dress shirts, white boxers and fleece-lined slippers that were several times too large. Granted, the shirt did almost cover the boxers, but it just didn't seem like a good idea. "I look like we just got out of bed."

"Precisely. Come here."

On the edge of a full blown sulk, Sarah barely avoided flouncing over to where Jordan sat on the edge of the bed. The long fingered hands of her lover began rolling up Sarah's sleeve. "Are you sure this is what I should wear?" Sarah continued. "It's practically see through."

"If you don't dress like this," Jordan said patiently, "you'll feel out of place. If you have a good time tonight and want to come to more parties, I'll take you out and buy you a leather outfit. But, I can pretty much guarantee that it will be more revealing than this. Besides, I *want* them to think we just got out of bed. The best protection I can give you is to make them believe that you are mine."

Sarah accepted the words as truth, but she couldn't help feeling out of sorts. "Couldn't I at least wear a darker shirt?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

Sarah ground her teeth in frustration. "I am *not* your slave. You can't just order me like that and get away with it."

Jordan reached for the other sleeve, but said nothing.

"Are you listening to me?"

"No."

Angry, Sarah snatched her arm back, but Jordan quickly grabbed her around the waist and pulled her down to the bed. "Let me go," Sarah said through gritted teeth.

"You're scared."

"I am not."

"Everything I do is for a reason," Jordan said quietly.

"I don't care. Let me up."

"It's perfectly normal to be scared, baby. You don't know what to expect. I do. All you have to do is trust me. *Do* you trust me?"

Sarah could feel tears welling up in her eyes. "It's not about trust."

"What is it about then?"

Closing her eyes, Sarah struggled to get her churning emotions under control. She *was* afraid. More so than at any other time in her life. She stood on a precipice and nothing would ever be the same if she jumped. Would she fall or would she fly?

"You don't have to come up, little one. You can stay here and wait for me. Surely you know that I don't require this of you. I thought you wanted to see a party. If you're only doing this to try to make me happy, I don't want you to come. But, if it's for you, then you need to trust me. *Nothing* will happen to you upstairs. Even if you change your mind and want me to play with you, I won't. Afterward, we'll talk about anything and everything. If this is what you want to do, I'll do everything in my power to make it a good experience for you, but you have to accept that I know what's best. You have to accept that for the next few hours, you *are* my submissive. Do what I tell you to do and you'll be just fine. Or, stay here. I love you no matter what you decide."

Sarah curled into the protective strength of Jordan's long body. "I *am* scared," she whispered.

"I know, baby. It's all right. I won't let anything hurt you."

She cried softly for a few minutes and then relaxed. Did she want to go? In spite of her fears, her curiosity was still high. She did want to see a party. Not just for what people would do, but to see Jordan as the Dungeon Master. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to accept it all as inevitable. "Alright."

Jordan brushed hair from Sarah's face with a gentle touch. "You can stay here, baby. You don't have to come."

"No, I want to."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded as tears were wiped from her cheeks. "I suppose I should call you Master?"

"That might be best."

"Are you going to give me any other instructions before we go? Do I have to kneel or anything?"

"That depends on what kind of impression you want to give. I hadn't planned on asking you to."

Sarah sat up and held her arm out so Jordan could finish rolling the sleeve. "Aren't you going to be judged on how I behave?"

"Perhaps. I'm not terribly concerned with it."

She considered the situation carefully. Sarah might not have any real clue how Jordan was perceived by her players, but she thought it likely that authority and respect were crucial during the parties. If she were to behave incorrectly, it would reflect on Jordan. She didn't want to be the cause of the players treating Jordan as if she didn't command. Since Jordan had made it clear that they would not be playing, Sarah felt that she could afford to allow Jordan to be the dominant. It was all just an illusion anyway. "Jordan?"

Finished with the sleeves, Jordan unfastened one more button on Sarah's shirt. "Yes, baby?"

"Maybe you should . . . I mean, if I'm going to be your submissive, maybe I should act like one."

"Do you want to?"

Sarah couldn't meet her eyes. "I don't want them to think that you aren't my Master. It wouldn't be good for your reputation."

"I see."

"Just for the party," she clarified. "What do I do?"

"Do what I tell you without hesitation or resistance. Don't question me. Don't look into the eyes of the other dominants. Don't react to anything I say about you. On the other hand, feel free to be yourself. No one will expect you to be a perfect sub at your first party."

Sarah glanced up. "Do they know it's my first?"

"Well, they've never seen you at one and you're young. They'll assume that it is. Just remember that every single one of them had a first party and not necessarily here. Some of them have horror stories about their first times. I promise you that none of them will want your first time to be terrible. It'll be okay, Sarah. When it's all over, you'll wonder what you were so worried about."

Sarah reached out and straightened Jordan's tie. "You look really good."

"Thank you." Jordan grinned. "You know, I'm becoming accustomed to having you dress me. I like it very much."

Sarah had to smile. "I like doing it."

Jordan gently lifted Sarah's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. "You can say you aren't my slave, but the messages I'm getting are somewhat confusing. We need to talk about that sometime."

"Alright."

"Are you ready?"

Sarah took a calming breath. "Yes."

A total of seven couples came to the party. Four were heterosexual, two were lesbian and one was two men. All of them looked familiar from the New Years Eve party. Sarah wrapped a hand in Jordan's belt at the small of her back and stood behind her shoulder as Jordan greeted them all. No one spoke to Sarah, but their eyes drank her in.

Costumes were revealed as Jordan took their coats. Sarah felt like her eyes were going to pop out. Leather, spikes, corsets, chaps, strap-ons, vinyl, chains: it looked like Halloween. One of the men had his genitals in a leather bag that was attached by a chain to a wrist cuff. His woman put it on her arm and gently tugged on it to make him follow. Most of the women had their breasts at least partially exposed and they were not the only ones who were pierced.

In spite of the malevolent nature of their clothing, everyone was smiling and talking. After greeting one another, they trooped upstairs while Jordan locked the front door.

"How are you doing?" Jordan asked.

"My God," Sarah whispered. "Is that normal?"

Jordan laughed quietly. "Pretty much."

Sarah clutched at Jordan's arm. "*Thank you* for letting me wear this. I had no idea."

"You're welcome, baby. Come on. Let's go have a party."

It wasn't so bad. Sarah had expected the players to dive right into the mayhem, but it started off with dimming the lights and some good classic rock and roll music. People were visiting with each other. Within the first few minutes, the division of dominant and submissive sorted itself out. Subs stood by (or knelt) quietly as the dominants talked and laughed. One of the lesbian couples danced together with loving looks and deliberate caresses. Sarah was surprised that two of the straight women were in the dominant role. If it was true that they were doing what they wanted, then the men were choosing to be submissive. It was strange.

Coffee was made and handed around. Jordan slowly made the rounds as host, but Sarah could hardly pay attention to what they talked about. Keeping her hand tucked into Jordan's leather belt so as not to be separated from her, Sarah let her eyes wander. There was so much to take in.

One of the dancing women was losing her shirt. Sarah snuggled into Jordan's back, but she had to watch. In the past, sneaking into bars to find dates, Sarah had watched a lot of women making love on the dance floor, but she had never seen anything as blatant as this. The women weren't even trying to hide the fact that they were making love. Grinding on each other's legs, the topless woman held her lover's head to her breast with her head thrown back, pleasure evident on her face. It was beautiful.

Sarah could feel her own body responding. It made Jordan's hunger two nights before more understandable. After waiting for hours and then falling asleep, Sarah had been woken by a ravenous woman. Jordan had made love to her repeatedly and then collapsed after her own orgasm. Sarah had to wonder how Jordan went for so long without a lover if this was what she did three nights a week.

Her heart raced and she tried not to squirm as a hand slipped under the topless woman's skirt. With a knowing smile, the dressed woman brought her lover to orgasm and they began to laugh. Sarah hid her face against Jordan's shirt to hide the feelings it had given her. Jordan had said that she would not play with Sarah even if she changed her mind. The way she felt right now, it was a good thing to know.

A tug on her sleeve made her slip under Jordan's arm and into her embrace.

"You okay?"

Sarah nodded.

"That's Karen and Amy. Karen's in the vest. They've been together for four or five years and that's what they come to the parties for. They like being watched. You enjoyed it, didn't you?"

Sarah blushed to her roots.

"It's okay, little one. You'd have to be three days dead not to enjoy it."

"How do you stand it?"

"What?"

Sarah lifted her chin and repeated her question. "Doesn't it make you. . .?"

"Yes. It does. I like it. Don't you?"

"Well, sure, but . . ."

"You're embarrassed."

"Yeah."

"It's okay. Everything you feel is perfectly normal. You're doing fine."

Grateful that she wasn't exploring one of these parties on her own, Sarah hugged Jordan hard for a moment and then caught sight of another woman on her knees unfastening a man's pants. "Oh, God."

"Hmm?"

She tried not to grimace as the man's penis was exposed. It was not quite what she expected. "Um . . . Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"Isn't that supposed to be bigger?"

Jordan turned to look and then smiled against Sarah's temple. "Don't make me laugh, baby."

She looked up into Jordan's face as the woman covered the man's penis with a condom and took it in her mouth. "Isn't it?"

"He can't help what he was born with," Jordan said with a grin. "Actually, he's pretty average."

"Yours is bigger."

"Mine isn't real," Jordan whispered. "It can be any size we want it to be."

Sarah looked back at the couple. It was pretty disgusting to her and all of the lust the two women

had inspired in her faded away. She had to work to keep a straight face. "It's kind of gross."

"Not for them," Jordan said. "Watch her. Can you see how much she's enjoying it? Ultimately, the only difference between what she's doing and what you do when you take *me* in your mouth is size."

"Maybe," she conceded reluctantly.

"If my clitoris were bigger, would you still suck on it?"

Sarah imagined it and a bolt of passion made her shiver. "Yes."

"And if it were that big?"

Sarah took a deep breath and let it go. "You've made your point."

Jordan rubbed Sarah's back in long strokes. "You're right though. It is kind of revolting."

Having Jordan agree with her after making her look at it differently made her laugh. "Why didn't you just say that at the beginning?"

Jordan just shrugged and ran a hand over Sarah's long hair. "I'm thirsty. Go get me one of those iced teas. Berry."

Sarah was halfway to the refrigerator before she realized that she had followed an order. Not a request-an order. Oh, well. She was already doing it. To refuse now seemed pointless, especially since she would have done it anyway. Closing the refrigerator, Sarah twisted the cap off and tossed it in the trash.

"Hi."

She turned to find one of the straight women standing behind her wearing nothing but a smile. Sarah forced herself not to look down. "Hi."

"My name is Leslie."

There was a delicate chain suspended from the woman's nipples and Sarah was dying to look closer. "Sarah."

"First time?"

She glanced at Jordan and saw her nod with approval. "Um . . . yeah."

"Let me be the first to say welcome."

"Thanks."

Leslie moved to the coffee machine and poured a cup. "You're with Master Crisp?"

"Yes." What did one say to a naked woman with chains on her nipples? "Who are you with?"

Leslie pointed discretely to a man of slender build. "That's my husband, Phil."

"Oh." She swallowed hard. "Um . . . I should take this back to . . . my Master."

Leslie smiled. "Of course. It was nice to meet you. Maybe we can talk later. If your Master will allow it."

"Um . . . sure." It took everything she had not to *run* back to Jordan's side. It was ridiculous to be frightened by a friendly face, but she couldn't help it. Jordan merely circled her with one arm and took a long drink of the iced tea. Sarah desperately wanted to be casual about everything. Jordan was acting no different than always when there were guests in the house, but Sarah couldn't be that indifferent. In fact, she could feel the screaming meemies breathing down the back of her neck. Not since the very first time she had entered the dungeon had she experienced a reaction like this.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. I mean, what the hell am I doing here? Playing here with Jordan was magical, but this . . . it's too . . . real. I like the dungeon and I like cleaning it, but these people . . . I don't belong here. I'm not like them. What I do with Jordan is private and special. I could never do it here in front of these people.

Sarah looked over at the straight couple. The woman was on her hands and knees now and the man was penetrating her from behind. Jordan had fingered her in that position a number of times and it had been beautiful. Nothing like what she was seeing now. Is that how she and Jordan looked when they did it? Did it look so cheap and tawdry? It couldn't possibly. It was magic when Jordan was touching her. It was about passion and emotion building to impossible heights; not this rutting, animal display. She looked away.

The gay male couple was talking to the other lesbian couple. Sarah realized how much more normal gay couples looked to her than straight couples. It wasn't a thing she had ever been aware of before. The two women were in their thirties. The taller one was slender and athletic, seemingly of Native American or Hispanic descent. The other was softer and rounder with a warm smile. The two men were fit and handsome and could almost be taken for brothers except for the way they touched each other. Both were wearing leather harnesses made out of straps and buckles on their torsos and one was idly playing with his partner's nipple ring as they chatted.

The idea of having a needle put through her nipple was unpleasant, but Sarah had to admit to a certain curiosity about how it would feel to have Jordan playing with her nipple like that. It was easy to imagine Jordan leading her around by such an ornament. In fact, it was rather exciting to think about. She wondered if Jordan had been the one to give him the piercing.

The man with his genitals on a leash was licking his Mistress's knee high vinyl boots while she

talked with another man. A woman knelt at that man's feet with her eyes on the floor. The dynamics of it all were so strange. Of course, she had read about this sort of thing and had an intellectual understanding of what was going on, but she didn't really comprehend it on an emotional level.

Sarah looked around and saw a man arranging a woman on a spanking stool. He was talking quietly to her as he secured her wrists and ankles with padded straps. Sarah jumped when he swatted her ass with his hand.

"She wants it," Jordan said quietly.

Sarah realized she was clutching Jordan tightly and tried to relax.

"Come on," Jordan urged gently. "Let's sit down and watch. We can talk quietly while it's happening."

Sarah's knees were rubbery as they moved a little closer and Jordan sat down in an easy chair. She let herself be pulled into Jordan's lap, grateful for the comfort and safety she found there. "What's he going to do?" she asked in a whisper.

"Whatever she wants him to do," Jordan answered.

Looking up into her lover's face, she saw that Jordan was completely at ease. "Whatever she wants," Sarah murmured to herself.

"That's right, baby. There's nothing to be afraid of here. He's not angry with her. You can see it in his face. And look at her. She's smiling."

They were seated about fifteen feet from the couple and it was true. The woman was smiling and the man did not look at all angry. "What are their names?"

"Richard and Dana."

"Are they married?"

"No. They're not even a couple in real life. They play with different people and switch roles frequently. They play well together. Just remember that they talked about this scene before tonight. Both of them are doing exactly what they want. When she's had enough, she'll use the dungeon safe word and he'll stop."

The next half hour was fascinating to Sarah. With Jordan's whispered commentary in her ear, she relaxed and just absorbed what she was seeing. Richard stopped frequently to caress Dana and talk to her about how she was feeling, but by the time Dana used the safe word, her buttocks and thighs were a bright, angry red. Dana had been crying for some time, but when Richard released her, she was laughing. The two of them moved off to a sofa where Richard lovingly held Dana in his arms, their words soft and accompanied by smiles.

"How are you doing?"

Sarah closed her eyes at the soft caress of Jordan's hand in her hair. "I think I'm okay."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

Snuggling deeper into Jordan's arms, she sighed. "Later, I think. Could you just hold me for a while?"

"For as long as you want, little one."

~***~

The low buzz of conversation slowly pulled Sarah from slumber. At first, the words were indistinct, but they slowly began to make sense to her.

"...Too much power for one person to have over another. Unless, of course, that is the nature of your relationship."

"At this point, power is not a fundamental part of our relationship."

Sarah almost hummed with pleasure at the sound of Jordan's voice above her. She could almost feel the vibrations of Jordan's speech through the thick vest she wore. It made her feel safe and cherished.

"On the contrary," the man's voice insisted without rancor. "Whether you admit to it or not, power *is* at the core of your relationship. Regardless of whether you are using it or not, you have control over her most basic needs: food and shelter. Knowing that, how can you be sure that her participation in your relationship is truly consensual? Giving her the information to make informed choices and having the patience to let her find her own desires and limits is not enough, Jordan. As long as you are the boss, she is not free to consent."

"She *is* free to choose," Jordan said. "I swore to her that nothing that happens between us will affect her home or position on my staff. I keep my word."

"I know you do, Jordan, but promises of freedom mean nothing to the trapped and enslaved."

All of a sudden, Sarah understood that they were discussing *her*. The man seemed to be suggesting that she was not capable of self-determination. He was saying that Jordan was not honorable. Her eyes popped open and she started to sit up.

Jordan felt her move and smiled down at her. "Hello, little one."

Sarah put an arm around Jordan's shoulders and looked around. The two gay men from the party were sitting on a loveseat close by. Everyone else seemed to have left. The music was down low

and the lights were up. She looked straight into the eyes of the one who was sitting forward with his elbows on his knees. "I am not a slave and I am not trapped. Jordan does not control me, nor would he ever take advantage of his authority. You do not know him at all if you think he would. Besides which, I fail to see how our relationship is any of your business. Where do you get off passing judgements like that?"

He was grinning and Jordan was chuckling. Sarah turned her head to stare at her lover. "This isn't funny, Jordan. I heard what he said about you. About us."

"It's okay, baby."

"No, it's not." Gentle fingers lay over her lips and Sarah bit off her next words.

"Greg is not attacking me," Jordan explained. "He is looking out for you. Part of the responsibility of being dominant is watching out for submissives. We watch to make sure no one is being used or abused or manipulated."

"But, you're not..."

"I know that, and you know that," Jordan interrupted. "But, Greg does have a point. One we need to discuss sooner rather than later. I have too much power over your life."

Sarah shook her head. "Not since you put Pete in charge of me."

Jordan winced. "I never did that."

This surprised her. "Why not?"

"Oh, at least ten valid, if not very convincing, reasons come to mind. I think I just didn't want anything to change and I was concerned with how Pete would feel about it. He thinks the moon rises and sets on you."

Sarah took a deep breath and considered it. "It doesn't matter to me. If I thought you were the kind of person who would use your position to force me into things I don't want, I wouldn't be with you. I trust you."

"Trust may not be enough if feelings get hurt."

Sarah swivelled her eyes to Greg with a glare at his comment. "What do you want?"

He blinked once as if surprised and then cocked his head, his brown eyes intent on her. "I'd just like the two of you to talk all of this out. Make sure the power dynamic is fair and equitable for you both. You can choose to give up as much power as you like into Jordan's keeping, but only if you actually have that power to begin with."

Sarah still didn't like the fact that he felt he had the right to say such things, but even Jordan had

been saying that they needed to talk. If she was honest with herself, she was afraid of the talk they needed to have. She didn't want things to change. Things were good. They might not stay good if they made changes.

Gregg patted the leg of the man next to him. "We should get going. Thanks for another great party, Jordan."

Sarah made as if to get up, but Jordan's arm tightened around her waist until she relaxed. She forced smiles at the two departing men, listening as Jordan charged them with making sure everyone else really was gone. Soon enough they were alone. Sarah kept her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"Don't be," Jordan said quietly. "I think this has been the best time I've ever had at one of my parties. I loved it."

Sarah sighed and rested her head on Jordan's shoulder. "You're too easy. I fell asleep on you and you say it's the best time you've ever had."

"It was."

She sighed again. "I don't want things to change, Jordan. I like things the way they are now."

"Are you happy?"

She nodded and closed her eyes.

Jordan stretched her legs out and resettled Sarah on her lap. "I'm happy, too. Happier than I ever thought I could be. But, I worry."

"About what?"

"What your plans are after you graduate. Whether you will stay or go."

Sarah's eyes opened, but she stayed where she was. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to be happy."

Biting at her lip, she thought about it. "That's a cop out."

"I know, but it's true."

Sitting up, she shifted so she could comfortably look into Jordan's face for the truth. "What do you want for you, Jordan?"

"Honestly? I want you to stay with me forever."

Forever. She swallowed against the doubts and fears that assailed her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am." Jordan's face was clear of any subterfuge.

"You make it sound so simple."

Jordan nodded thoughtfully. "Nothing is ever easy until after the fact. I don't think we will have a happily-ever-after life, little one. I think that sometimes it will be damn hard. But I think, in the end, growing and evolving with you is what I want to do with the rest of my life. The question is, is that what you want to do with *your* life? I know that you are not ready to answer that question and that's okay. I can wait for an answer. Even if it turns out to be the answer I would not choose for me. You are not obligated to give me what I want."

"I know that, but..." She paused helplessly.

"It's okay, little one. Don't worry about it. This is not an answer you can rush. Let it go for now. When the time comes, do what is right for you. As long as it's what you want and it makes you happy, I will be happy for you. Truly."

Sarah put a hand to the rugged face as tenderness washed through her. "How can you be so completely sweet and understanding?"

"You make it easy, little one."

Petting the side of Jordan's face, Sarah held back tears at how lucky she felt. Never, in any fantasy she had ever entertained, had she thought she would be with someone like Jordan. It was just the most amazing feeling.

"I think we should talk about your position as employee," Jordan said gently.

Sarah sighed and let her hands fall to the broad shoulders. "Jordan...I really like cleaning the dungeon."

"I think I know that, love."

"It's more like a hobby than a job," Sarah added. "I would do it even if you weren't paying me. It's not like I need your money. I make so much in tips...you don't even know. And now that my settlement is coming through for the accident, I really don't need a salary anymore. What if I cleaned the dungeon in exchange for rent and tips only? Would that equalize the power dynamic for the other tops? I don't want them challenging how we are with each other. I don't care what you say, it's none of their business."

Jordan nodded thoughtfully. "How we feel about each other is none of their business, but I appreciate that they are looking out for us. I don't mind a bit of challenge. I think I need it sometimes to keep me honest about my actions and motives." Her eyes narrowed and she took a deep breath. "What you say about your finances and wanting to clean the dungeon makes sense

to me and I believe you, but does your plan balance the power dynamic between us? Will it make you feel like you are my equal?"

Sarah couldn't help a little snort of amusement. "Equals? We will never be equals, Jordan."

A look of pain flickered across Jordan's rugged face. "If that is true," she said quietly, "then we have a serious problem."

The statement felt ominous and ignited a swarm of bees in Sarah's belly. "I just meant that I'm probably never going to be as rich and as influential as you are. There's always going to be an imbalance in our relationship because of that."

Jordan hesitated and then sighed. "It's more than that, isn't it? You still see me in terms of age, wealth and accomplishment."

The conversation was starting to scare Sarah, but she had to be honest. Placing a hand over Jordan's heart, she spoke slowly. "It's not what you are, Jordan. It's what I'm not. I am never going to be your equal. Can't you see that?"

"No."

She could see the truth in Jordan's clear eyes. The older woman really meant that. Sarah slid off her lap with a sigh of frustration and folded her arms. "I just don't understand how you cannot see the disparity between us. We are so different."

"I see that just fine," Jordan said firmly. "I am well aware of how different we are in so many ways. It's one of the things I love most about being with you. What I didn't understand was how very different our values are."

That caught Sarah up short. "What do you mean?"

Jordan rose to her feet. She looked down at Sarah as if from a vast distance. "When I look at you, I see the sharpness of your intellect, the goodness of your heart and the strength of your soul. You look at me and see my house, my money and my position. We are not equal because you can't see *me*. If you could, you would know that the lack of equality you perceive lies within me. Not within you. *You* are the better woman, Sarah, in every way that matters. Until you can see past the material trappings of my life and see yourself as you truly are, we have no hope for a future."

Shocked to her core, Sarah could only stand helplessly as Jordan turned and left the dungeon. Long minutes passed as she struggled to understand what had just happened. Then she began to get angry. Was Jordan being deliberately obtuse? Jordan's wealth and position were real. They were not Sarah's imagination.

It was all so confusing. Even if they had the same money, position and life experience, they would still not be equals. Jordan would still be who she was. She was a dominant personality and

nothing would change that. She had a presence and authority that Sarah would never have. Even if everything else between them was balanced, there was still that fact. If someone wasn't seeing themselves clearly, it was Jordan.

Knowing that she was too angry and confused to face Jordan just yet, Sarah began to clean.

~***~

Sarah woke up to a large hand on her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see Pete's face above her and smiled. "Hey. Welcome back. How was your honeymoon?"

Pete held out a steaming mug. "Coffee?"

"Oh yeah," she said as she stretched. After cleaning, she had still been uncertain about seeing Jordan, so she had curled up on one of the dungeon sofas with a blanket. It had not been as comfortable as her own bed-or Jordan's for that matter-but it had been comfortable enough. She sat up and reached for the coffee cup. "What time is it?"

"Twenty after eight."

She had plenty of time to get ready for school. Sarah sipped at the fragrant brew and looked more closely at Pete. He did not look happy. "What's wrong?"

"What is going on between you and Mr. Crisp?"

Uh oh. "I'm not sure I know what you are asking," she hedged. Sarah wouldn't have thought it was possible considering his complexion, but Pete's face darkened.

"What is the nature of your relationship with our employer?" he enunciated clearly.

Fear curled around her tongue and all she could do was stare at the big man.

"What has he done?"

Sarah shook her head in denial. "Nothing. I mean...he didn't..."

Pete took a deep breath and his eyes softened. "If he has manipulated you into some sort of..." He took another breath and started over. "Whatever is going on, it's not your fault. I can help you get a lawyer and you can..."

Sarah sat forward and put a hand on Pete's arm. "No, Pete. It's not like that. Really."

He looked at her intently. "Tell me what's happening. I can help you."

Sarah used one hand to rub her eyes. This was getting out of hand. *Damn Jordan for not handling this when she said she would!* Settling the blanket around her bare legs, she considered

where to start. "Jordan and I have been dating since New Year's. I have not been coerced or manipulated into anything. Jordan has been very careful not to pressure me in any way."

Pete sat back in his chair, his eyes staying focused on her. "I thought you were gay."

Sarah hid a sigh. "I am. I guess...maybe I just found the right guy."

Dark brown eyes roamed over Sarah. "And you are dressed like that and sleeping in the dungeon because...?"

A blush of epic proportions flashed to the surface of most of Sarah's body and she had to look away. "I wanted to see a party," she mumbled.

"*You* wanted to see one, or *Jordan* wanted you there?"

Sarah's head popped up in irritation. "Why are you so quick to believe that Jordan is the bad guy? You've got Jordan forcing me into sex and dragging me to BDSM parties. What has he ever done to make you think he would do that? Or is it that you think I'm incapable of making my own decisions in these matters? Do you really think I'm that helpless? Damn, Pete, I could use a little respect here. I know I'm young, but I'm not a child. Nothing has happened that I haven't wanted and asked for."

"Are you sure?"

He looked so doubtful that all Sarah could do for a long moment was gape at him. "Yes, I'm sure. I can't believe you even feel the need to ask."

Pete rubbed the top of his head with one meaty hand. "He's older and more experienced than you are, Sarah. That's not a judgment on you. It's just a fact. He could be manipulating you and you might not even be aware of it. If that's the case, I'm here to help you."

Sarah buried her face in her hands. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Sarah..."

"Stop," she interrupted with her hands held out between them. "Just stop." Brushing her hair back, she took a deep breath and looked into the big man's face. "There is no reason or need for you to be so quick to defend me. Though, I do appreciate it. You are not the only one trying to look out for me. What's happening between Jordan and me is safe and consensual. If you want to talk to Jordan about it, go right ahead, but I can't do this right now. I just woke up and I'm feeling kind of ambushed. And, maybe, a little frustrated. I need some time to think, okay?"

He nodded once. "Alright then. But, my door is open if you want to talk."

"Thank you, Pete." She took another deep breath and reached for her coffee. "Thanks for waking me up with coffee."

"You're welcome," he said with a hint of a smile.

Taking a sip of the hot brew, Sarah studied his face. "So, how was the honeymoon?"

"Too short."

She had to grin. "I'll bet. But, it's nice to have you back. I know Jordan missed you."

Pete snorted. "I'll spend the rest of the week fixing the mess he made of my system."

"I bet you won't." At his raised eyebrows, she added, "I helped out a bit."

He looked pleased and surprised. "Thank you, Sarah."

"No problem," she said with a shrug. Gathering the blanket around her waist, she stood up.

"Well, I need to get my clothes and start thinking about getting ready for school."

His smile faded, but his eyes were gentle. "Have a good day."

"Thanks. You, too."

The housekeepers hadn't started their shift yet so Sarah was able to get to Jordan's office without being observed. Once downstairs, she left the blanket in a pile by the door and went into Jordan's apartment. The lights were on and it was quiet. She found Jordan lying across the king size bed still fully dressed. Part of her longed to lay down with her lover and make all the confusion go away in her arms. Another part wanted to smother the tall woman with a pillow. Neither option seemed very practical.

Sarah reached for one edge of the comforter and began to pull it over the long form.

"I was wrong."

She stopped at Jordan's rough voice. "What?"

"I was wrong," Jordan repeated. "I think you do see me. I think you have some valid concerns."

Sarah dropped the comforter and moved to sit next to Jordan. Putting one hand on a long leather-clad leg, she let herself relax. Just being near Jordan calmed her. "I'm not sure if I can get past them and that scares me."

"It scares me, too."

Sighing, Sarah turned to lay on her side and draped an arm over Jordan's back. "I wish I could see myself the way you seem to. The person you see seems so much more confident and mature than I feel. I feel so...inadequate."

Jordan turned her head and their eyes met. "I never feel that about you, little one. Not ever."

It was clear to Sarah that Jordan had not slept. She looked haggard. Reaching up with one hand, she caressed the rugged face gently. Several things began to make sense all at once and Sarah took a moment to sort through them. "You know, it's really not about your money or your success. I mean, those are easy things to point to, but I think those are just smoke screens."

A little bit of life filtered back into Jordan's eyes. "How so?"

"I'm not real sure yet," Sarah said slowly. "I think it's still unclear for me. Maybe...I think it's really about feeling like equals. Because I don't think we are and I don't think we ever will be."

Sarah tried not to take the flicker of pain in Jordan's gaze personally. She focused on what her thoughts were trying to puzzle out. "Being equal doesn't mean being the same, does it?"

"No."

"Then...what does it mean?"

Jordan looked thoughtful. "That's a good question. What does it mean to you?"

"I'm not sure." Sarah's mind was moving quickly now, sorting and rearranging. "I suppose...it's the power and freedom to make choices."

"How equal do you think we are based on that definition?"

Sarah smiled at her lover. "Okay, so we're equals."

Jordan slowly rose up and shifted to her side so she could lean on an elbow. "Do you really believe that? It's very important to me that you truly *know* that we are equal."

Sarah rolled to her back and laced her fingers behind her head. "I need to think about it some more, but yeah."

Jordan nodded. "I think," she said very slowly, "that the reservations you have about us and our relationship revolve around self-worth. It's not about money, or power, or experience, or age. It's that you don't feel worthy of being loved."

Tears flooded Sarah's eyes and her throat tightened. Jordan was right. She started to turn her eyes away, but a gentle hand cupped her face. She had no choice but to look into Jordan's eyes.

"I'm going to say something that will sound presumptuous and arrogant, but it's not. It's something I want you to think about. Will you do that?"

Biting her lip to keep from crying, Sarah nodded.

Jordan's gaze intensified. "You are not the one who gets to decide whether or not you are worthy of my love."

It took a few seconds for that statement to register. Sarah turned her eyes to stare at the ceiling while she thought about it. The statement was almost shocking to her in its accuracy. Jordan was the only one who could decide if Sarah was right for her. Just like Sarah was the only one who could make that decision about Jordan's suitability. "Wow."

"Wow?"

Sarah glanced at the woman above her and almost laughed at the quirky grin she found. "Wow pretty much covers it."

Jordan sighed dramatically. "Good. It took me all night to come up with that little nugget of wisdom."

Sarah laughed as she wiped the pent-up tears from her eyes. "You're such a goof."

"I know."

Sarah reached up to lay her hand along her lover's cheek. "I love that about you."

Jordan's smile was brilliant. "I love you, too."

Their lips came together in a gentle, loving caress and Sarah wound her arms around Jordan, pulling her down into a tight embrace. "Are we okay?"

"Yes, little one. There are still things we need to talk about, but we're okay."

Sarah let herself float in the safety of the moment, but then she remembered Pete. She pushed Jordan back far enough that she could see into her eyes. "You need to talk to Pete. He knows about us."

Jordan frowned.

"He woke me up with coffee and an offer to help me get away from you. He was under the impression that you were manipulating me into everything."

Jordan growled and rolled away. She stood up and walked into the bathroom, only to come right back out. "What did you say?"

Sarah sat up. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't understand why he would automatically assume the worst about you. I thought the two of you were pretty friendly."

Hands on hips, Jordan stared up at the ceiling for a long moment, the muscles in her jaw

clenching. "How did he find out?"

Sarah left the bed and went to put her arms around Jordan. "I didn't think to ask. Maybe someone from the reception said something to him." It took a few moments, but Jordan began to relax. "I don't care if he knows, but it bothers me that he thought you might be the kind of person who would force me to do what you want. We need to work on your reputation."

Jordan chuckled as her arms surrounded Sarah. "I'll put it on my to-do list." She pulled back a little to smile down at Sarah. "Now, don't you have school today?"

Sarah groaned. "Don't remind me."

~***~

Sarah was trying to study in the university library when several things suddenly came together in her mind. *Jordan is my Top! Not just when we played in the dungeon. I think I see her as my Top all the time. Maybe that's why I don't feel like we are really equals.*

She sat back in her chair, her studies forgotten as she mulled it over. I think I want her to be the dominant one. I know I sometimes feel a little frustrated at how cautious she is about making sure that I feel I have control. So far, I've always been excited when she steps up and takes over. Like the first time we made love. We didn't discuss it first and it didn't just happen because we lost control. Jordan just decided for us and basically told me how it was going to be. I really liked that. It made me feel...free. Is that right? Did it free me somehow? Maybe.

The question now is: how much control do I want her to have? I know she's getting mixed messages about that. I don't feel like I am being inconsistent or confusing, but if she's not sure, I must be. Do I want to be her slave?

Sarah couldn't help a shiver of revulsion. Why does it have to be such a loaded word? Slavery is wrong. I can feel that in my bones. I know, I know...it's not really slavery because I have a choice about doing it and I can end it whenever I want, but I just really hate that word. Let's try submissive. Do I want to be Jordan's submissive? I already bottom for her in the dungeon. Being her submissive just takes the role out of the dungeon and makes it a more intrinsic part of our relationship. But if we do that, I come right back to the question of the hour. How much control do I want her to have? How much control over my life do I want to give up?

There was no easy answer. There was so much in the BDSM lifestyle that she just didn't know and hadn't experienced. How could she make a decision like that when she didn't really know what she would be getting into?

Sarah was almost late to her next class and, afterwards, she couldn't remember anything that had been covered. Fortunately, she was still recording her lectures. This was definitely one she would have to listen to later.

The evening drive was uneventful and Sarah was glad to get home. Once inside her house, she

dropped everything by the door and took a deep breath. Jordan was not on the couch waiting for her, but there were boots under the coffee table. Sarah stepped over to the bedroom door and found Jordan sleeping in her bed. Folding her arms, she leaned against the door jamb and just looked.

I love that woman.

The intensity of the feeling brought tears to her eyes.

I love Jordan Crisp. Whether I am good enough for her or not, I love her. I think I always have. Why is it so hard for me to tell her that? It can't be that I fear rejection. Jordan has been offering me her heart without hesitation for months. That can't have been easy. Do I think she will stop loving me? No, I don't think that. And I can't see her becoming apathetic towards me. Maybe my fear is just an old habit. A habit I should work on kicking.

Sarah locked the front door and turned the heat up a few degrees. Stripping off her clothes, she crawled into bed and snuggled up to her deliciously warm lover.

Jordan's eyes didn't open, but a big smile broke out on her face as she pulled Sarah closer. "You're home."

Sarah hummed her pleasure in response.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too," Sarah answered. "Go back to sleep, sweetie."

It was dinner time when they woke up. Sarah put her arms over her head and savored a full-body stretch. Relaxing, she turned to look at Jordan. "Why are you smiling like that?"

Jordan shrugged with one shoulder. "You're just so damn beautiful."

Sarah blushed, but she loved hearing it. "You're just too charming for your own good."

The tall woman looked pleased. "I know. It should be illegal to be me."

Sarah chuckled. "How did it go with Pete? Did you talk to him?"

Jordan fell back on the bed with a groan. "Yeah, I did."

Concerned, Sarah leaned on an elbow so she could see Jordan's face. "Was it bad?"

"Not bad, really. Just complicated, I guess."

Sarah moved closer and put a hand in the valley between Jordan's breasts. "Are you alright?"

Jordan took a deep breath and lay a hand over Sarah's. "Yeah. I should have confided in him a long time ago. Aside from his concern for you, he was most upset that I have been hiding my gender from him all this time."

Sarah's eyes opened wide. "You told him?"

Jordan snorted a laugh. "He didn't believe me. I had to show him."

"What?"

Jordan mimed pulling a shirt open with a grin. "Yep. I had to show him the goods before he would listen. For a couple of minutes there, he was white. Or blind. I'm not real sure which."

Sarah wasn't sure whether to be upset or laugh. The idea of Jordan flashing her breasts at Pete made her feel a little crazy. "Why would he think you would lie about something like that?"

"I lied about being a man. Why wouldn't he think I was lying?"

It was an excellent point. One for which Sarah didn't have a comeback.

"Anyway, I think things are okay between us now. At least in regards to my gender. He's reserving judgement on my involvement with you." Jordan laughed softly. "I have been told in no uncertain terms that if I hurt you or break your heart, my heart will be torn out of my chest and shoved up my ass."

Sarah was horrified. "He actually said that to you?"

"Oh yeah." Jordan reached up to fluff the pillow behind her head. "If your parents weren't such jerks, I'd expect that little speech from your dad. I'm glad Pete has decided to become your champion. You couldn't have a better one."

Sarah had mixed feelings about that. "I'm not convinced that I need a champion, but if I do, I kind of thought it would be you."

"You do have me, baby. You do. But Pete will be a different kind of champion than I can be. I'm completely involved with you on an emotional level. Pete cares about you deeply, but he can be more objective. Maggie is your champion, too, and she will provide you things that the rest of us can't."

"Do you think I *need* champions?"

"We all need champions, little one. Not at every moment, of course, but it's always good to have people who will go to the wall for you when the shit hits the fan." Jordan cocked her head. "You've never had that. It will probably take some getting used to."

"Do you have champions?"

"Oh yeah. You, Maggie and Pete are the main ones, but there are a handful of players that would back me up in a heartbeat. Stephen would, too. He's my financial guy."

"The friend from college?"

Jordan nodded. "He's coming up in May for a week or so. You'll get to meet him then. You'll like him."

Sarah didn't really care one way or the other about Stephen, but she filed the information away. The phone rang as she opened her mouth to speak. Sarah sent an apology to Jordan with her eyes and reached for the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, Sarah. This is Amanda."

"Hi, Amanda. Or should I say Mrs. Bennett?"

Amanda's laugh was rich and full. Jordan pointed at the bathroom with a grimace and Sarah nodded. She watched as Jordan slipped out of bed and walked across the room. *She has such a great ass.*

"Amanda will do fine. I am not yet accustomed to the name change."

"Okay," Sarah said as she lay back on the bed. "I saw Pete this morning. He said the honeymoon was too short."

"Yes, I heard you had talked. I also heard that Jordan came out as a woman."

Sarah sighed. "I didn't know she was going to do that. I guess Pete was a little hard on her."

"Understandable, but in his defense, he is also quick to forgive. He will need some time to adjust, but he'll come around. He likes Jordan a great deal. He doesn't want to lose that friendship."

"That's good to know." Sarah wiggled her eyebrows at Jordan as she came back and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I am calling to ask if you would like to have lunch this week."

"Sure. That would be great. When?"

"I don't start back to work until next week, so we can get together any time that is convenient for you."

"Well, tomorrow is my short day," Sarah offered. "I've only got one class and it's over at noon. I can meet you somewhere at 12:30?"

"Perfect. Do you like Mexican food?"

"Yes."

"There's a little place called *Compadres* on the corner of Ninth and Baxter. Will that work for you?"

"I'll be there."

"Very good. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Okay."

Sarah hung up the phone and smiled at Jordan. "I have a date."

"With a married woman."

"It's still a date," she teased.

Jordan rolled her eyes. "Right. If she put the moves on you, you'd faint."

"Probably," Sarah laughed.

"I would, too," Jordan admitted with a grin.

It seemed weird that they were both talking about Amanda that way. "I am attracted to her. I mean, who wouldn't be, but I don't really want her."

"I know, baby. I feel the same way. She has an extraordinary sensual magnetism about her, but it's so strong that it almost acts as a barrier to keep people away. I've met a few other people like that and they are usually very lonely. It's a lot like people of exceptional beauty who have a hard time finding someone who will see past the surface and see the beauty underneath. I'm very glad that she and Pete found each other."

"Me, too. I think they'll be one of those couples that stays together forever."

"I hope so." Jordan smiled. "I should probably get going so you can study."

Sarah shook her head before she had time to consider it.

"Or I can stay."

Feeling suddenly vulnerable, Sarah sat up and put her arms around Jordan's neck for a tight hug. Jordan immediately wrapped Sarah up in long arms.

"It's okay, little one. I've got you. It's okay."

They sat that way for a long time. Sarah wanted to talk, but she just didn't know where to start. Especially now that she had made such a dramatic gesture of emotional instability. She finally settled on, "I'm sorry."

"For what, little one?"

Sarah's grip lightened and she sighed. "I just wanted to talk and now I've made it all dramatic."

Jordan shook her head. "This isn't dramatic, baby, and I think it's an excellent start for a conversation. What's on your mind?"

Sarah sighed again. "It's just that I spent all day thinking about what we talked about this morning and I came to some more conclusions. Some of them are kind of confusing."

"Okay," Jordan said easily. "Let's get more comfortable."

They ended up side by side on the bed, legs intertwined and facing each other. Sarah stared at the base of Jordan's throat until a large hand tilted her head up and their eyes met.

"It's just me, baby, and I love you desperately. You can tell me anything and I'll listen."

Sarah knew she had to start somewhere so she blurted out the realization that had started it all. "You're my Top."

"I know."

"No. I mean...you're *my Top*."

Jordan's eyes narrowed in concentration. "I understand what you're saying, but I'm not sure what you mean."

Sarah bit her lip as she tried to think of a way to explain. "I don't know how to verbalize what that means. It feels so profound to me. So important. *You're my Top*."

"Okay," Jordan said slowly. "What does Top mean to you? What is a Top?"

"The one in control. The one with the power."

"So, when you say that I am your Top, you are saying that I am the one who has the control and power in our relationship?"

Sarah opened her mouth to say yes and then realized that there was more to it. "No. I think I'm saying that I *choose* for you to have the control and power. I think that I'm your submissive."

A slow smile spread over Jordan's face. "I think it should be obvious that I am very happy with

that choice. But, how do you feel about it?"

"I'm a little confused about it. I don't remember making a choice to be your submissive. I just sort of realized that I am. But I'm not sure what it means to be your submissive. How will things change?"

"First, let's figure out what you think it means to be a submissive. Do you think you have to act differently?"

Sarah bit her lip again. "Yes?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Not really."

"Okay. The way I see it, if you already feel like you are my sub, then you are. I don't see any need for you to learn a new way to *act* submissive. Maybe what you need to figure out is how you want to *express* your submission. We also need to figure out how you want me to express my dominance. That might actually be easier for you to define."

Sarah frowned. "See, it feels like you are making it all about what I want. Again. When are you going to tell me what *you* want? And please don't say you just want me to be happy. I feel like I'm flying blind here and I need some help."

"I have to worry about riding rough-shod over your needs and desires, little one. It is in the nature of dominants to be too aggressive and demanding. The line between dominance and emotional abuse is all but invisible."

"I accept that," Sarah said patiently, "but maybe you could be just a little more aggressive and demanding? It's like the play lists. It wasn't until I read yours that I started to get an idea of what I really wanted. Maybe I need to hear what you want before I can open up to what I want. You can trust me to be honest, you know."

Jordan smiled. "I do know. But, let me ask you some questions first to clarify things. What I'm hearing is that you would like the Dominant/submissive aspect of our relationship to be more inclusive than limited to playing in the dungeon. Is that correct?"

It felt like a huge step to admit it. Sarah swallowed her butterflies and nodded.

"All right. I am also hearing that you want me to take more control in our interactions. Is that correct?"

Arousal began to burn within Sarah. "Yes," she whispered.

"And our love-making? Do you want that to change?"

"Not change," Sarah said slowly.

"But...?"

"I still want to be able to make love to you, but sometimes...maybe you could be more..."

"Like in the dungeon?"

Sarah nodded. "But, I'm not at all unhappy with us...with the way we..."

"I understand," Jordan interrupted.

"Do you? I'm not hurting your feelings?"

"Are you kidding?" Jordan took one of Sarah's hands and lay it over her heart. "Do you feel that?"

Not only was Jordan's heart racing at an unbelievable pace, it was pounding *really* hard. Sarah looked at her hand in disbelief and then up into Jordan's blue eyes. "You need to calm down before something explodes."

Jordan burst out laughing. Sarah was too concerned to join in. She kept her hand on the beating organ while Jordan howled. It began to slow and she started to relax. When Jordan was almost in control, she said, "This is very exciting for you."

"You could say that," Jordan said as she wiped tears from her eyes. "Is it exciting for you?"

Sarah grinned shyly. "Yeah."

"Good." Jordan took a deep breath and let it out noisily. "I really needed that. Thank you."

"You're welcome, I guess."

"Whew!" Jordan lifted Sarah's hand and kissed it before putting it back on her chest. "Okay. What else was confusing you today?"

Sarah snuggled back into the tall woman's side and lay her head on a strong shoulder. "I spent a lot of time today trying to figure out how much control I want you to have."

"What did you decide?"

"I don't know. I'm having a hard time figuring out how it's possible to be independent and submissive at the same time. Some of the books I read said that the best submissives are really strong and independent people. That just doesn't make any sense to me."

"Weak, dependent personalities require nurturing, not dominating. It is the strong personalities

that make domination rewarding. Imagine two dogs. One is growling at you and standing his ground. The other one is crawling on the ground pissing itself. Which one would you rather dominate? Personally, dominating the one that is crawling would just make me feel like an asshole. But, to work with the other one and watch it grow and change would be exhilarating. Not that I am comparing you to a dog, mind you."

The metaphor made sense to Sarah in a way that the books failed to do. "Do you think I need a lot of work?"

"No! I think you are perfect the way you are, baby. I'm excited about all of this, yes, but more because you want it than because I want it. I do not require this of you. Do you understand that?"

Sarah relaxed. "Yes. I think so. It's just that the way I see myself is changing. I'm really not sure what I'm getting myself into."

"Do you see this as something that is going to *happen* to you?"

Sarah thought it over. "I think I did. But that isn't right, is it?"

"No, baby. It's not. If it's *happening* to you, it's abuse. If it's something you are participating in with me, then it's D/s. Does that make sense?"

"Actually, it does. You should write a book. You make more sense than the stuff I read. I don't feel nearly as confused as I did. I still don't understand how all of this works, but I'm not as afraid of it."

"That's good, baby."

Sarah gathered her courage for what she would say next. "I want you to spank me."

There was a moment's hesitation. "Why?"

Sarah lifted her head so she could look at Jordan. "I don't know if I like it or not. It seems like I should know."

Jordan frowned and then relaxed. "No."

"What?"

"No. I won't spank you until the day you come to me and convince me that you need it in the same way that you need air to breathe."

"But...how will I know if I need it unless I know whether or not I like it?"

"It's not about whether or not you like it," Jordan said seriously. "It's about whether or not you *need* it. If you do, you'll know it."

"Oh."

"Trust me on this one, baby."

"Okay." Sarah lay her head back down. She felt a little disappointed, but she was relieved as well. The fact that she felt relief told her that Jordan was probably right.

Several minutes passed in comfortable silence and then Jordan spoke. "I will not interfere with your schooling or the time you need for study. I know how important it is to you. It's important to me as well."

"Thank you."

"You will make yourself available to dress me before every party. I enjoy that a great deal. On party nights, you will sleep in my room. I will sleep here on the other nights. Unless there is a good reason otherwise, you will attend the Sunday night parties with me. You will wear what I tell you to wear and do what I tell you to do during the party. Understood?"

Sarah shivered with excitement. "Yes."

Jordan's arms tightened. "I'm your Top, little one. You're mine now."

Sarah almost cried at the happiness she felt.

~***~

Amanda looked great. Sarah dropped down into the chair across from her with a big grin. "Hey."

Amanda looked up from her menu with a mysterious smile. "Hey yourself."

"Am I late?"

"Not at all. Thank you for taking time out of your day to spend with me."

Sarah made a face. "You don't have to thank me for this. I've been wanting to get to know you better."

Amanda's smile was amazing. "Likewise."

Sarah reached for a menu. "What's good here?"

"Everything. They've only been open for a few weeks. Six months from now you won't be able to get a table without a reservation."

"That good?"

"Better."

The next ten minutes were spent perusing the menu together and ordering their choices. When the waiter left, Sarah brushed her hair back with both hands and smiled at her lunch date. "I didn't get a chance before to tell you congratulations on your wedding. I loved the ceremony and your dress was gorgeous."

"Thank you."

"I have some pretty good pictures from the reception. I've got them on a disc in my backpack. If you want them," she offered tentatively.

"I would love them. It's very sweet of you to offer them."

Sarah shrugged as she dug in her backpack for the disc. "It was fun to do. Mostly I took pictures of other people. It seemed like everyone was concentrating on you and Pete. Which totally makes sense, but I thought you might like pictures of the rest of the guests. I got one I really like of your dads." She found the disc and slid it across the table to Amanda.

"Thank you for this. And thank you for the windchimes. Did you have a chance to listen to them? They sound like rain."

"I thought so, too," Sarah said with some surprise.

"The metal ones can become annoying so quickly, but the ones you gave us are wonderful. I can't imagine ever getting tired of them."

"I'm really glad you liked them."

Amanda leaned forward with a lop-sided grin. "I understand congratulations are in order for you and Jordan as well."

Sarah blushed shyly. "Pete told you."

"I suspected at Halloween. I knew at New Year's."

Sarah laughed nervously. "Even I didn't know at New Year's."

"It can be difficult to see clearly in matters of the heart."

"Ain't that the truth," Sarah sighed.

Amanda laughed softly. "In any case, I am happy for you both."

"Thanks."

"Did you really tell my husband that you found the right man?"

"I did," Sarah grinned.

"You are too funny."

"It was all I could think of without totally lying to him. By the way, how did he find out? Was it someone from the reception? We might have been a little obvious towards the end there."

"There's video," Amanda said with a wiggle of her elegant eyebrows.

"Oh God," Sarah groaned.

Laughing, Amanda leaned forward to pat Sarah's arm. "It's not bad, Sarah. In fact, the way you two move together is exquisite. Have you heard of Torvill and Dean?"

"No."

"They were British ice dancers in the eighties and nineties. My mother loved them. She has tapes of every televised performance they ever did. Not only were they brilliant technically, but the *way* they moved together was ethereal. I've never seen any other couple dance with the connection they had...until I watched you and Jordan ballroom dancing. It was beautiful."

The sincerity of Amanda's words was clear and Sarah wasn't sure what to say. It *felt* beautiful to dance with Jordan, but she hadn't been aware that others could see it. Knowing made her feel a little like she was naked.

"Where did you learn to dance like that?"

"Jordan has been teaching me," Sarah said.

"I'm jealous. Not only that you can dance like that, but that the chances of Peter ever learning how to be that graceful are so slim."

Sarah had to grin. Pete was not an ungraceful man, but he would never have Jordan's agility of movement. "I'd pay good money to watch Jordan try to teach him."

Amanda threw her head back with a laugh. "So would I!"

There were complimentary chips and salsa on the table and Sarah reached for them. The chips were warm and the salsa was delicious. "Wow," she said after swallowing. "This is really good."

Amanda followed suit. "You can buy the salsa to take home if you like."

"Oh, I like. Jordan will love this stuff." Amanda was grinning at her. "What?"

"You're just so adorable."

Sarah blushed.

"You do not seem to be quite the same woman you were at the Halloween party. You are more relaxed, more confident. It suits you."

Sarah sipped her ice water to give herself a moment to think. "I don't feel precisely the same. I'm happier for one."

"It's obvious."

"I'm not sure if I feel like that is a good thing or a bad thing."

"How could it be a bad thing?"

Sarah shrugged. "Being happier is a good thing, but having my emotions so clear to other people makes me feel...vulnerable. I don't mind it with Jordan and Maggie. Or even with you. But with most people, I'm not sure I want them to see how I feel."

"That's understandable."

She remembered Lisa's vicious verbal attack with a shudder. "People can be really mean."

"True, but most of the time they aren't. I find that being happy and allowing it to show usually works to my advantage. People like being around those who are happy. Most of the time, people will go out of their way to contribute to the happiness they see in others. A smile, a courtesy; something small, yet still valuable. It is rare that happiness will spark a negative reaction. When it does, you are not obligated to participate. Just move on and let it go."

Sarah sighed. "I'll have to work on that."

"The more secure you are in your happiness, the easier it is."

She sighed again as that statement hit home. "That's a tough one for me."

"Feeling secure?"

"Yeah."

"It takes time."

"I can't even tell her that I love her," Sarah blurted out. "I feel it...Oh God, I *feel* it...but I can't make the words come out of my mouth. She tells me all the time, but I can't say it. Sometimes I feel like I will choke if I don't let the words out, but I just can't make myself do it. I feel like such

a jerk."

The waiter chose that moment to return with their food. Sarah sat back quietly and let Amanda handle it. She felt foolish for dumping that information out there and wasn't sure how to recover.

It only took moments for the waiter to arrange the table and retreat. Embarrassed, Sarah couldn't look up into Amanda's eyes, but she could feel the dark eyes on her, waiting for her. The warm and spicy smell of her food gave Sarah something to talk about. "This smells so good."

Amanda chuckled softly and reached for the sour cream. "Yes, it does."

Simply put, it was the best Mexican food Sarah had ever eaten. Conversation took a back seat to their enjoyment of the meal. The portions were quite large and Sarah was very nearly in danger of exploding when she finally cleared her plate. Leaning back in her seat, she groaned and rubbed her bloated belly. "Oh my God. I ate way too much. I think I need a nap."

Amanda mirrored Sarah's pose with a smile. "How about we go for a stroll to work some of this off?"

"I'm not sure I can. You might have to roll me out the door."

Ten minutes later, lunch was paid for and Sarah carried a large jar of salsa in one arm. They headed for Sarah's car to drop it off before beginning their walk.

"I always loved this car," Amanda said of the sleek Jaguar. "It's nice of Jordan to let you drive it."

"Oh, it's mine now," Sarah grinned. "Jordan sold it to me for a thousand dollars because Cirenio couldn't get the smell out."

Amanda's cultured eyebrows rose. "What smell?"

Sarah told the story while they walked and had a good laugh about it with Amanda. "I was a little surprised how much it cost to get it registered. Not to mention that my insurance went through the roof. I'm thinking about trading it in for something cheaper and more fuel efficient, but I'm not sure how Jordan will feel about it."

"Have you asked her?"

"Not yet. I think I should have an idea what I want to trade it for first. You know, have all my ducks in a row."

"And if she says no?"

Sarah hadn't considered that. She found herself feeling indignant about it and it hadn't even happened yet. "You're right," she said thoughtfully. "It's my car now. I should be able to do what

I want with it."

"I'm sure you will," Amanda said smoothly. "Although, you are probably right to want to tell her first. I was just curious if you were asking permission."

"No," Sarah said quickly. "Well, maybe a little. I don't want to hurt her feelings. The Jag is a beautiful car. I just don't think it's an everyday kind of car for me. It makes me feel like I'm putting on airs."

"Heaven forbid."

Sarah laughed at the teasing tone. "It does! I'm just not the kind of person who can feel comfortable driving a fancy car all the time."

Amanda smiled, but she kept her eyes on the street. "One of the things I like so much about you is that in spite of your extraordinary beauty, you are *real*."

Sarah tripped over her feet and would have fallen flat on her face but for Amanda's quick grasp of her arm.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Sarah said with a blush as she got her balance back. Brushing her hair out of her eyes, she gave a tiny smile to her new friend. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Sarah fell back into step with Amanda. "Um, I'm not sure how to ask this without sounding like I am fishing for a compliment, but you really think I'm pretty?"

"No. I think you are the most beautiful white woman I've ever seen."

Sarah halted and stared at the dark woman in confusion. "Are you serious?"

Amanda stopped and turned to face Sarah. "Yes."

Shaking her head, Sarah sighed. "I don't see it. In fact, I've thought the same thing about you. Except for the white bit."

Amanda's smile brightened the entire street. "Thank you."

She had to smile at the pleasure in Amanda's face. "You're welcome."

Amanda released a short laugh and gestured at the street. "I wonder if they realize it."

Sarah looked at the few other people she could see. "Realize what?"

"The two most beautiful women in the world are passing by. They must feel so blessed."

Sarah laughed so hard she snorted. That made both of them laugh even harder. There was a wooden bench outside of a jewelry store and Sarah dropped onto it to catch her breath. Amanda sat down next to her and put an arm along the back of the bench. It was a few minutes before they could look at each other without laughing.

"So," Amanda began. "Tell me why you can't tell Jordan you love her."

Sarah sighed, but she did not lose her smile. "I don't know. I can feel the words on the tip of my tongue every time I look at her, but my throat closes up."

"Hmm."

"I did say it once by accident. I freaked out. It was horrible."

"Maybe you just care for her. It doesn't have to be love."

Sarah considered her feelings. "I guess that's possible, but my feelings...if it's not love, I can't imagine what it would feel like. And I don't have any problem telling you and Maggie that I love her. It's just that I can't say it to Jordan."

Amanda nodded, her eyes far away for a moment. "What does it mean to you?"

"Mean?" Sarah concentrated on trying to comprehend exactly what Amanda was asking her.

"If you were to tell her that you love her, what would telling her mean to you?"

"Ah," she breathed in understanding. She did not have a ready answer. Staring off across the street, yet not really seeing anything, Sarah let herself think about it. At first, nothing was coming clear. Then she tried visualizing saying the words to Jordan. Her eyes suddenly opened wide. "It's the commitment."

Amanda made a humming noise of understanding.

Sarah felt a bit as if she were in shock as things clarified for her. "It's not about whether or not I love her," she mused aloud. "Saying it is like a promise. I'm not sure I'm ready to make promises."

With a grimace for the predicament she found herself in, Sarah looked up at Amanda. "I had a plan. I'm almost done with school. It's time to start putting out feelers on a job that will teach me more about running a business. It could be anywhere. I'll work that job until I'm ready to work for myself. It will be years before I am ready to settle down; years before I can make a commitment to Jordan. She shouldn't have to wait that long and it wouldn't be fair of me to ask her to."

"So, your relationship with Jordan is only temporary?"

Sarah gaped like a fish. When she realized it, she shut her mouth with a snap. Was that what she was doing with Jordan? Was it really only a temporary relationship? Not only did it feel wrong to think of what they had that way, just considering it made her feel like a jerk of the first order. "No," she said finally. "At least, I hope not."

"Then it sounds to me like you need a new plan."

"Just like that?" she asked doubtfully.

"Sure," Amanda said casually. "Why not? Wasn't the purpose of going to school in the first place to give yourself more choices? More options?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

Amanda turned towards Sarah just a bit and resettled. "It seems to me that you have quite a few options now. Yes, you could get a job somewhere else. Or you could focus on finding something local. From what I understand, your academic standing is quite high. If you were to look for something local, you could pick and choose. You won't be forced to consider a managerial position in the fast food industry."

Sarah had to smile at the thought of that.

"There are many large and small businesses here. Any of them would fall all over themselves to get someone of your caliber. Moving away does not have to be a necessity in getting the experience you desire."

"That's true," Sarah conceded.

"Another consideration," Amanda continued, "is that you could continue your education. I have no doubt that Jordan would be thrilled to finance your education."

Sarah shook her head. "No. I don't want to use her like that."

"She may not consider it as being used."

"But, I would."

Amanda nodded in concession. "In any case, my point is that your choices and options are not fixed in stone. Just because you had a plan does not mean that you cannot change that plan and still achieve your original goals. Getting to this point may have required a certain amount of inflexibility, but everything is different now. You got where you needed to be in order to have more control over your life. Now it may be time to reconsider the direction you want your life to take."

"I see what you are saying," Sarah said thoughtfully. "I have a lot to consider."

"Maybe not so much as you think."

"What do you mean?"

"For the first year after you graduate, what few things do you want the most in your life?"

The answer was easy. "Jordan and a job."

"There you go," Amanda said with a smile. "All you have to figure out is how to blend those two things."

It sounded so simple and Sarah realized in an instant that it really *was* that simple. It did not have to be a complicated, gut-wrenching decision. She realized that she had always assumed that she would end up working for a large corporation after her schooling was done, but was that the best experience for learning how to start her own business? Maybe it would be better to work for a smaller company where she could learn *all* aspects of running a company instead of focusing on one department. If that was the best option for her, then finding something local meant that she was not sacrificing her future by staying. And if that was true, then staying meant that she could keep Jordan without jeopardizing her career plans.

Sarah felt that a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders and she could not help laughing at how much freer she felt. She turned to Amanda with a wide smile. "Is there anything else you can offer to make my life easier?"

"I do have an observation," she stated with calm amusement.

"Go for it."

Amanda seemed to think it over for a few seconds. "The moment of committing to a serious relationship is different for everyone."

Sarah's smile faded as she tried to understand. "I'm not sure what you are saying."

"For me, the moment in which I committed myself to a lifelong relationship with Peter was during our first serious argument. For Peter, it was actually saying 'I do' at the wedding; which is not to say that he was not committed before that moment. It just did not become a fundamental part of his being until that moment. He needed the formality of the ceremony to make that leap. Arriving at the moment where love transcends into commitment is different for everyone. I think for you, it will be when you can look Jordan in the eye and tell her that you love her. If that is true, then you should not push yourself to tell her until you are sure. For you, it is not just about telling her how you feel. When you say 'I love you', it will be for keeps."

Sarah let the words settle in her gut. It felt right. Not being able to say the words suddenly didn't

seem so bad. She knew it was probably still hard for Jordan to not hear them, but now she understood that there was a good reason for withholding them. It was not arbitrary or selfish on her part. Some of the guilt she felt dissipated. "Wow. I think you are right."

"Jordan is a very lucky woman."

Warmth filled Sarah and brought tears to her eyes. "*I'm* the lucky one."

~***~

"Having your arms up like that only adds stress to the muscles, sweetie. Put your arms down along your sides."

Face down on Sarah's bed, Jordan moved her arms down with a flinch and a groan. "Really hurts," she rasped.

"Are you sure you shouldn't see a doctor?"

"No. It's just a cramp."

Sarah had come home to find Jordan curled up on her bed complaining of back pain. After stripping the androgynous woman's upper body, Sarah had warmed massage oil and was now seated on Jordan's legs. Rubbing the vanilla-scented oil between her hands, she placed them in the small of Jordan's back. "Where does it hurt?"

"The left side," Jordan directed. "Up a bit...Oh God...right there."

Sarah could feel the knot of muscle causing Jordan pain. It was tight and warm to the touch. "I feel it. How did you do this?"

"Ugh...leaned over to pick up a piece of paper."

"That's it?"

"Yep. It's hell getting old."

Sarah smiled as her hands began gently working the cramp. "You're not old, sweetie."

Jordan made a grunting noise that could have meant anything or nothing. Except for the occasional groan or hiss from Jordan, the next ten minutes were quiet. Sarah gradually increased the pressure of her touch, hoping that she was doing it right and not making the problem worse. She was so focused on what she was doing that she actually felt the cramp dissipate with a nearly audible pop. Jordan gave a long, shuddering sigh and relaxed bonelessly into the bed.

"Better?" Sarah asked.

"Unnghhmmmgrrr."

Grinning, Sarah spread her hands out to do the rest of her lover's back. She loved touching Jordan. It was almost like the skin of her hands was a brand new sensory organ. At times she swore that she could see, taste and hear through her hands. It was an extraordinary sense and usually made her feel like she was high. Today was one of those times.

Jordan had such a beautiful body. She was strong and muscular, but she also had the wonderful softness of women. Sarah leaned over to place a gentle kiss between Jordan's shoulder blades. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

"Glad you think so," Jordan murmured.

Sarah turned her face to rub her cheek against the warm flesh. "I don't *think* you're beautiful. You just are. So soft and warm. You always smell so nice."

Jordan purred. "Feels so good."

Sarah sat back and peeled off her shirt and bra. She needed to feel the skin on skin of their bodies. The room was just a touch cool and her nipples tightened pleasurably. Shifting forward, she lay down on Jordan's back. Moving her hands down the long arms, she wound their fingers together. "I am so lucky," she breathed.

"I don't know about that," Jordan said softly. "Seems to me like I'm the lucky one."

"Nope," Sarah said as she snuggled deeper into the long body beneath her. "It's definitely me. I'm the lucky one."

They lay quietly for several minutes and Sarah felt her heart expanding. She wanted so badly to tell Jordan how she was feeling, but once again the words were trapped behind her teeth. Finally, in frustration, she blurted out, "Just because I can't say it doesn't mean I don't feel it."

Jordan started to lift her head and then stopped. There was a tension in the lean frame that hadn't been there moments before. Sarah held her breath.

"Lift up so I can turn over, baby."

Sarah shifted to let her lover roll over, uncertain of what she would find in Jordan's eyes. The handsome features were very carefully composed and Sarah reached up to caress a cheek. "I feel it," she whispered.

"Are we talking about the L word?"

Sarah nodded and watched hope bloom in the blue eyes.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes," she admitted.

Tears welled up in Jordan's eyes. "Are you *in love* with me?"

As impossible as it was to actually say the words, it was a relief to answer that question. "Yes, I am."

The big woman began to cry. Sarah ached for her and quickly gathered her close. "I'm so sorry, Jordan. I wish I could say it myself. I feel it and think about it all the time, but the words just won't come out. I've been trying so hard and I just can't. But, I do feel it. So much."

Jordan cried hard for several minutes and then stopped. She was smiling as Sarah cleaned the tears from her face.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"Don't be, little one."

"I know it must be hard to continually tell me you love me and not get anything back."

Jordan reached up with both hands to cradle Sarah's face. "That's not true, little one. I get back plenty. The way you look at me. The way you touch me. The way you take care of me. Don't ever think that telling you I love you is a hardship for me."

"But..."

"I know that you love me, Sarah. I've known for a long time. And I know that your current inability to verbalize your feelings has nothing to do with me. It's not because I'm scary or remote or unlovable. Don't beat yourself up for not being able to say it out loud. You tell me how you feel all the time in other ways."

"Then...why were you crying?"

Jordan shrugged. "Just happier than usual, I guess."

The goofy look on Jordan's face made Sarah smile. She leaned forward and gave Jordan a kiss. "I like making you happy," she said softly.

"You're very, very good at it," Jordan answered as their lips met again.

The kiss deepened and passion rose quickly. It was always this way for Sarah. A look, a touch, a smile, an innocent kiss: the smallest thing could awaken the hunger. It was like an addiction. Sarah lost herself in the taste and feel of Jordan's mouth, their skin merging, the warmth of their bodies. She could not get enough and Jordan was right there with her. Hands roamed, clutched, pulled, caressed and the fire grew.

"Off, off."

Sarah could feel Jordan's hands trying to remove her slacks and she was suddenly desperate to be naked. Rolling to one side, they worked together to get them off. She used her toes to push her socks off and kicked her slacks and underwear away. Reaching for Jordan's jeans, she tugged them open and began to pull them down. The dildo-of-the-day sprang to attention and Sarah hesitated.

Jordan reached down to release the straps holding it on and Sarah stopped her. A new hunger filled her. Leaving Jordan's jeans halfway down her legs, she climbed back up her lover's body and captured her mouth in a desperate kiss. The dildo was trapped between them, feeling warm, yet new and awkward. The disparity in their height put the latex toy right between Sarah's legs. Rubbing her liquid sex along the rigid length was almost accidental.

It felt delicious. Sarah rose up for a better angle and did it again. She was staring right down into Jordan's eyes and could see the naked longing there. She could also see a bit of uncertainty. They stared into each other's eyes as Sarah began to rock. It was strange, but she knew in a heartbeat that she could come this way. Her eyes closed as she enjoyed the sensations. Warm hands closed over her breasts, kneading and tugging at her nipples.

"That's it, baby," Jordan said huskily.

Sarah concentrated on the power of what she was feeling. It wasn't long before she wanted more. Moving carefully, she let the tip of the dildo find the entrance to her vagina. She opened her eyes and looked down at Jordan. "I want you to have it," she whispered.

"Are you sure? You only get this moment once. I want you to be sure."

Sarah nodded slowly, passion making it hard to do anything but feel. "Take it."

Jordan shook her head. "It's yours to give, baby."

She knew it was going to hurt. Just the little bit of pressure she was using to hold the dildo in place was causing discomfort. She had always assumed that when the time came, Jordan would be the one to take her past that pain. It was harder to cause it to herself.

"It's up to you, little one. You don't have to do this."

Sarah was slowly shifting her hips, her entire body throbbing and seeking relief. "I want to," she breathed.

"Then give it to me."

It felt like an order. Sarah obeyed. For the first few seconds there was a tearing pain and she sighed with relief when it disappeared. In the next moment, she could feel her insides grasping

for more. Staring down into Jordan's teary eyes, she slowly lowered her body until she was fully impaled. The fullness was new and different, but it felt surprisingly good.

"Oh my God," Jordan cried softly. "Oh my God."

Sarah closed her eyes and groaned. Her head fell back as she straightened and she moved her hips around the new sensations. Everything had intensified. Leaning forward again, she put her hands on Jordan's shoulders and slowly lifted her hips until the dildo was just barely inside of her. She slid back down until she was full with another groan. It was so very different than anything she had felt before. Her pleasure had shifted and was coming from a new, undiscovered place. It was powerful and yet vague. She didn't understand it, but she needed it.

Sarah began a slow rhythm of rising and falling. Jordan was watching her with rabid fascination, tears streaming down the sides of her face. "Am I hurting you?" Sarah asked breathlessly.

"God, no. You're just...you're so beautiful, baby."

Speaking was so hard, but Sarah had to ask. "Is it supposed to feel like this?"

"Like what? How does it feel?"

Trying to think of how to describe it just made the feelings stronger. The motions were new to her, but she was catching on quickly. Sarah let her whole body get into it, rocking back and forth on the latex shaft. "Feels...so big. The feelings, I mean. So strong."

"It's okay, little one. I've got you. Just let yourself go. I'll protect you."

The feelings spread like a warmth, but they were tangible, too. Like there was something growing inside of her. She could hear herself moaning and it only added to the wonderful sensations. One of Jordan's hands left her breast and moved down to fondle her clitoris. The intensity of her pleasure expanded and Sarah found herself on the edge of climax. She hovered there for an eternity and then imploded.

Helpless in the magnitude of her orgasm, Sarah slumped to Jordan's chest and struggled to breathe as her body continued to pulse and throb. She shivered uncontrollably as waves of pleasure echoed within her. She felt Jordan enfold her firmly and was grateful for the love and security being offered.

"How do you feel?" Jordan asked after a time.

"I don't know," she said weakly.

"Take your time, love."

"I didn't expect to enjoy it," she admitted. "I feel...embarrassed."

"Don't be embarrassed, baby. It was the most beautiful, incredible thing I've ever known. As long as I live I will remember this gift. Not just the gift of your virginity, but the pleasure you took in giving it. And the pleasure you gave me in the giving."

Sarah lifted her head to look for the truth and found it in Jordan's eyes. "You came?"

"Twice," Jordan grinned sheepishly.

"Really?"

"I couldn't help it. You are just so damn beautiful and exciting. I hope it's like that for you every time."

Sarah slid her arms under Jordan's torso and hugged her with all of her strength. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, little one." Large hands roamed soothingly over Sarah's back. "I should pull out soon, babe."

"Don't wanna," she moaned. "Want you there all the time. It still feels good."

"You're going to be sore, baby."

"I don't care. I'm not sore now."

Jordan chuckled. "I can't tell you how glad I am that you liked it. I wasn't sure if you would."

Sarah lifted her head and rested her chin between Jordan's breasts. "I've heard straight girls talk about it. I don't think they like it that much. Once in a while, but usually not. I think I expected it to be interesting, but not like...*that*."

"It may not be like that every time, baby. This time *you* were ready and you controlled it. That may have a great deal to do with how it felt. I'm really glad your first time was so good, but the next time might be different. If it is, it's not a failing on your part. It's just a different time and place. Take each time as its own thing, okay?"

Sarah smiled. "Okay."

Jordan reached down to her hips and released the harness. Grasping Sarah's hips, she flipped them over. Hovering over Sarah, she smiled and gave her a quick kiss. "Let it come out on its own, baby."

Sarah wrapped her legs around Jordan's waist. "Sure you don't want to give it another go?"

Jordan laughed. "Not today. Give it a couple of days to let yourself heal and then I'll take you for a spin."

Sarah grinned. "It's a date."

She laid on the bed with her knees spread as Jordan went into the bathroom and came back with a hand towel and a wet washcloth. The dildo was slowly sliding out on its own and she enjoyed the feeling, even if it was kind of weird. Jordan put the hand towel down to catch the dildo and began to wipe Sarah clean with the warm washcloth.

"Did I bleed a lot?"

"Some. Not too much."

Sarah sighed regretfully as her vagina expelled the toy, but she was enjoying the attentions of her lover. The warm cloth was especially nice. "That feels good."

Jordan smiled as she wrapped the harness and toy and set it aside. "Maybe I'll have it bronzed."

"I dare you."

One elegant eyebrow rose. "I accept."

Sarah's eyes widened. "You wouldn't."

"I will. And I'll hang it on my bedpost as a trophy."

Sarah wasn't sure if Jordan would actually do it and she thought she should take exception to the trophy comment, but she pictured it in her mind and found the image intriguing. If Jordan had said she would hang it in her office it would have been different, but Sarah rather liked the idea of seeing it hanging on the bed. "Okay."

A brief flicker of surprise was followed by a look of satisfaction. Jordan smiled and returned her gaze to her task.

Sarah felt almost boneless as she watched Jordan tending her. It felt so right to have herself exposed like this and Jordan right there. Feelings of love rose up. "I feel it," she said quietly.

Jordan's smile was luminous. "I know you do, little one. I love you, too."

[Continued...](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Six

The next several weeks were good ones. One of those weeks was spring break. Jordan wanted to take her someplace tropical, but Sarah talked her out of it. She really wanted the spare time to work on her proposal and make sure she was on track for her finals. Jordan was not happy about it, but relented when Sarah offered to go anywhere she wanted the week after she graduated. The next day, Jordan made her an appointment to get a passport. Sarah was dying to know what Jordan had planned that would require a passport, but Jordan just smiled.

Sarah divided her time off between studying, making love and taking pictures. Every day she went for a walk in the woods on the estate and took pictures of everything that captured her interest. With spring opening up, she got a lot of great shots. Mostly of birds, trees and flowers, but she had a series of shots of a fox at sunrise. It had been an unexpected encounter, but a rewarding one after the fox decided Sarah was no danger. Several of the pictures were extraordinary. Sarah printed the best shots and framed them for her wall.

Maggie finally decided on where she wanted to go for her yearly cruise. The cruise was thirteen days long and would visit Barbados, St. Martinique, Grenada and several other small islands. Actually, it was the *what* and not the *where* that she was excited about. The ship was a four-masted schooner. It was originally built in the 1890's and had a long and varied career as a floating casino, a weather monitoring station during World War II, and as a playground for the rich and famous. It now served as a cruise ship in the Carribean that encouraged its guests to help sail her. Maggie, of course, was not of an age or fitness level conducive to climbing the rigging, so she had volunteered to help in the kitchens for part of each day. In turn, they would teach her island recipes. Maggie was very excited about the trip scheduled for the first part of May, and talked of almost nothing else.

When Sarah saw the cost of the voyage, she nearly swallowed her tongue. Thirteen days would cost almost \$18,000. Granted, the pictures of the stateroom Maggie would sleep in were exquisite, but it still seemed like a lot of money. Especially if she were working on the ship. Jordan was the one to point out that Maggie would be taking a crash course in island cuisine and that there was to be a renowned historical lecturer on board. Maggie would be learning all kinds of things on the ship. It wasn't going to be just another boat ride. She also pointed out that Maggie deserved it. Sarah agreed.

On the social front, things were great. Tamar and Janet came over on Saturdays and they spent half the time just goofing off. Sarah also saw them during the week for more than just classes. They didn't go out and do things, but they did look for each other between classes and spent time visiting.

Amanda had gone back to work and they continued to meet on Tuesday afternoons to visit and go window shopping. Sarah was very surprised to find out that Amanda taught kindergarten. She couldn't help but think that those kids were incredibly lucky to have someone so warm and powerful as Amanda as a teacher. Just being able to spend a little time with Amanda every week made Sarah feel lucky.

Sarah still couldn't say those three little words to Jordan's face, but she learned that she could write them very easily. She took to putting mushy little love notes in odd places for Jordan to find. Jordan loved them and was saving them in an old cigar box in her closet. When Sarah accidentally found the box, it made her cry in happiness. In her next love note, she included some of her hair and it quickly found a place in the box as well.

Intercourse was becoming a more integrated part of their love-making. Sarah had been under the impression that a woman's sexual satisfaction with intercourse was a hit and miss thing. It was an impression reinforced by Jordan as well, but that didn't seem to be the case for Sarah. Every single time was good for her. Not just how good it felt, but how intimate it was being face to face with Jordan as they found their pleasure in one another. She knew that the largest part of how good it felt was the person she was with. She did not think it likely that it would be as good with anyone else.

Jordan seemed calmer and more confident since the introduction of intercourse to their

relationship. The differences in her masculine and feminine personas seemed to lessen and she seemed more accepting of herself. For the first time, Sarah could see that she had a positive effect on her lover and it made her feel proud and needed.

Every Sunday night, Sarah went with Jordan to the play parties. They had not yet gone shopping for special party clothes for Sarah and she continued to wear Jordan's dress shirts and slippers, but now with thong underwear. The parties were becoming more comfortable. Sarah looked forward to them. More people were coming on Sunday nights and Jordan said it was because they all wanted to see the woman who had tamed the Master. Sarah didn't think 'tamed' was a word that could be used about Jordan, but she thought the rest of it was true. At first she was uncomfortable with being ogled, but then she decided that it was okay. After all, she was ogling them, so it was only fair.

The hardest part of the parties now was that Sarah would become unbearably excited. It was so hard to wait until they all left so that she could make love with Jordan. It was terribly tempting to throw modesty to the wind and let Jordan have her way during the parties. Sarah found within herself a point of arousal that no longer cared if people were watching; but in her saner moments, she knew that it was a line she just wasn't ready to cross.

~***~

After a long Monday, Sarah entered her house to find Jordan reading a paperback on the sofa. Dropping her things by the door as Jordan casually tossed the book aside, she straddled the long legs and gave her lover a languorous kiss. "Hey, sweetie. Miss me?"

"You know it."

Sarah ran her fingers through short, brown hair, enjoying the feeling of the soft strands. "What did you do today?"

"I got an owie."

"Where?"

Jordan lifted an arm to point to her elbow. The skin was abraded and red, but not bloody. "Right there."

Sarah kissed the injury gently. "What happened?"

"Pete did it."

Sarah had to smile. Jordan sounded like a little kid tattling on a sibling. "Why did Pete hurt you?"

"Cause I wouldn't give him money," Jordan pouted.

"What did he want it for?"

"A swimming pool."

"Ahh." A pool sounded good to Sarah, especially since it was warming up, but she knew from a distant conversation that Jordan didn't want a pool because she couldn't swim. Actually, she claimed that she knew how to swim, she just didn't float. Apparently, not being able to float made swimming too hard. Sarah wasn't sure what to think of it, but if Jordan didn't want a pool, so be it. "So...you said no and...what?"

"He asked me if I was on the rag."

Sarah sucked her lips between her teeth and bit down. Anything to keep from laughing.

"So, of course," Jordan continued, "I had to chase him outside and rub his face in the dirt."

Coughing to cover a snort of laughter, Sarah managed to say, "Of course."

"He's a big guy, but I managed it," Jordan added proudly.

Sarah patted Jordan's shoulder as she got up. She was going to start laughing soon and decided on the bathroom as a good place to do it. "Good for you."

"Thank you."

Sarah couldn't help it. She stopped at the bedroom door and asked, "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"On the rag?"

Sarah was laughing too hard to put up much of a fight. Jordan pinned her to the bed and tickled her until she had the hiccups.

Sitting back on Sarah's legs, Jordan put her hands on her hips. "A spoonful of sugar will make them stop."

Sarah concentrated on the spasming muscles and made them relax. In a few moments, they stopped and she smiled up at her lover. "No need. They're gone."

Jordan's eyebrows rose. "How did you do that?"

"It's a yoga thing. You wouldn't understand."

"Smart ass." Jordan dropped down at Sarah's side and propped her chin on one hand. "Really. How did you do that?"

"It's just a matter of concentrating and relaxing," Sarah grinned. "I used to get hiccups all the time when I was little. And I mean, *all the time*. It took a while, but I figured out how to make them go away."

"Well, the next time I get them, you're going to teach me that little trick."

"Okay."

"Cool." Jordan placed a hand on Sarah's belly and sighed. "How was *your* day?"

"Not too bad. I aced that quiz I was worried about last week."

"I knew you would."

"That was a nice way to say 'I told you so'."

"I am a writer," Jordan sniffed pretentiously. "I'm good with words."

"So I've noticed," Sarah laughed.

"Is that Lisa chick still giving you the evil eye?"

"Nope. I think she figured out it wasn't working. Now she looks at me all smug and smirky."

"Smirky? Four years of college and you come up with smirky? You should get your money back."

"Hey," Sarah protested. "You weren't there. She was *definitely* smirky today. I wanted to smack her a couple of times, but I behaved myself. Poor Bonnie looked embarrassed to be seen with her. She couldn't even look at me."

"Hmpf. Bonnie needs to grow a spine."

"I know." They had talked about this before. Jordan was still upset about what had happened with the study group. Sarah knew she had to distract her now or she'd vent about Lisa and Bonnie for the next hour. "We're eating with Maggie tonight, right?"

Jordan seemed to shake off the impending rant before answering. "Yeah. She's up at the house making fresh bread right now."

"Yum. What else?"

"Um...pot roast and, I think, apple pie."

Sarah rubbed her hungry belly. "Will you still love me if I get really fat?"

Jordan rolled her eyes. "I'll try, baby."

Sarah aimed a light punch at Jordan's shoulder. "You'd better."

Jordan grinned.

Sarah rolled off the bed before Jordan could stop her. "I don't feel like studying today. Let's go up to the house and spend some time with Maggie. Okay?"

"You're the boss."

"Yeah, right."

~***~

Sarah woke up the next morning to the smell of coffee. Opening her eyes, she found Jordan sitting beside her with a steaming cup. "Morning."

"Good morning, baby." Jordan leaned over for a quick kiss and held out the cup for Sarah to take. "Happy April Fool's Day."

Sarah sat up as it sank in. She stared at the cup and looked at Jordan suspiciously. "What did you do to the coffee?"

"Nothing," Jordan said with wide-eyed innocence.

The coffee *smelled* right, but Sarah wasn't sure. "Did you put salt in it?"

"I swear," Jordan said earnestly, "I did not mess with the coffee."

Sarah thought about it. "It's something else then."

Jordan rolled her eyes in amusement. "Now why would you assume I'm going to play a prank on you? Just because it's April Fool's Day doesn't mean I'm going to play tricks on you."

It was all just too suspicious. All morning Jordan had a secret little smile on her face and it made Sarah jumpy. But as oddly innocent as Jordan was behaving, nothing in the way of a prank cropped up. Sarah headed off for school none the wiser as to Jordan's plans.

After her last class, Sarah headed for her car. Usually she would hang out for a while and study in the library until it was time to see Amanda, but today was the day of the blood drive for the players. She wanted to get home and help set it up. There wasn't a lot to do because it was a potluck, but she figured Maggie would fuss over it and she wanted to do what she could to help alleviate that.

A much older man in shirt sleeves and a tie began walking with her as she hit the parking lot and Sarah glanced at him to see what he wanted.

"You're Sarah Wylie."

It wasn't a question and it made prickles go up Sarah's neck. "Can I help you?"

"Richard Westman from the Journal. May I ask you a few questions?"

It took her a moment to understand that he was a reporter from the local newspaper. *This must be about the accident*, she thought. It was the only reason she could think of that a reporter might want to talk to her. Though it seemed a bit strange since the accident had been more than four months ago. She didn't really want to talk to him, but she didn't want to be rude. "I'm on my way to an appointment," she hedged.

"This will only take a moment, miss."

Sarah held back a sigh of reluctance. "All right."

Mr. Westman pulled a large photo from a manilla folder and held it out to her. "Do you know this man?"

Sarah took the picture without stopping. It was a color copy of Jordan; the one of him crouched in the snow with tears on his face during Sarah's accident. It was a much better photo than the black and white copy Pete had given her. The pain in Jordan's eyes was terrible and wonderful. "Yes, I do. This is Jordan Crisp."

"You work for him."

Sarah had a bad feeling about this. She came to a halt and turned to look the reporter in the eye. "You already know that I do. Why are you asking if you already know? Why do you care?"

Mr. Westman tapped the photo in Sarah's hands with one thick finger. "Just seems like his feelings for you are pretty strong."

Sarah lifted her chin defiantly. "Every one should be so lucky to know that their employer truly cares about what happens to them."

"Perhaps."

"May I keep this photo?"

"Sure."

Sarah tucked it in with her books.

"How well do you know Jordan Crisp?"

"Why?"

The reporter's eyes became predatory and smug. "Are you aware that he's really a woman?"

For a timeless moment, Sarah was stupefied. Then she thought maybe this was Jordan's April Fool's joke. But she knew it wasn't. She did the only thing she could think of. Sarah laughed. "Good one. You almost had me. Who put you up to this?"

"It's no joke, miss." He pulled another paper from his folder and held it up in front of her. "This proves it."

It was a birth certificate. Sarah reached for it more out of curiosity than anything else. It appeared to be authentic. Several things caught her attention. Jordan's middle name was Francis. Sarah hadn't known that. Jordan's birthday was June ninth. She had weighed nine pounds and two ounces and had been twenty-three inches long.

And the box for female was checked.

Sarah had to assume that this was the real deal. The fact that it was a reporter showing it to her could be a real problem. Jordan needed to know about this as soon as possible. But how should she handle it right now? What should she do?

"How does it feel to know that your *employer* has been lying to you?"

"I'm not convinced that he has been," Sarah said slowly. "Is this real?"

"Yes."

"Then how did you get it?"

"I have my sources."

Sarah pinned the birth certificate to her chest with her books, hoping that she could keep it. "If your source works in the Office of Vital Records, then you've both broken the law. *If* this is really my boss's birth certificate."

"Oh, it is," he smiled. "But then, you already know that he's a woman because you're sleeping with him. When did that start? Before or after the accident?"

Sarah rolled her eyes as dramatically as she could. "Is this what you do when you don't have a story? Make one up? I hope you don't think of yourself as a journalist."

"So, it's true then."

Sarah sighed, shook her head in disbelief and turned to walk away. "I don't have anything else to say to you."

"Tell me about the dungeon."

It took everything Sarah had to contain the fear she felt. She turned to the man again with a puzzled expression. "What dungeon?"

"Come now, Miss Wylie. You know what I'm talking about."

"Actually, I don't. There is no dungeon."

"I know that there is," he said menacingly. "Your boss runs a sex club out of that house. An S&M sex club. People traipse in and out of that house at all hours. Some of them are folks just like you and me, but he's also entertaining elected officials and major business owners. The people have a right to know what's going on in their own town."

"Wow," Sarah said with what she hoped was a grin. "That's some story, Mister. Just one problem. I'm a maid. I've been in every room in that house and there is no dungeon. I've met a lot of the people you are talking about and they are not doing S&M. At least, not in Mr. Crisp's home. Now, I doubt you believe me because I don't think you want to, but it's true. Somebody's yanking your chain."

"You're his lover," he responded with a scowl. "I expect you to lie to me. But I *will* uncover the truth and I *will* expose what goes on in that house."

Sarah shrugged..or thought she did. She was pretty numb. "Go ahead. No skin off my nose." She turned again to walk away and thought of something. Turning back, she added, "By the way, if it's true that Mr. Crisp is a woman, why do you continue to call him by masculine pronouns?"

The confusion on his face almost made her laugh and she used that moment to saunter towards her car.

"I need that certificate back," he called.

"Then you shouldn't have given it to me," she called back. Sarah half expected him to come after her, but he didn't. He was on a cell phone when she drove past him and she flipped him off just to make herself feel better.

It was a miracle that she didn't cause an accident or get a ticket on the way home. The Jag could really move when it wanted to. Fifteen minutes after leaving school, Sarah was running across the lawn towards the big house with the birth certificate in her hand. She startled Maggie as she entered the kitchen.

"Where's Jordan?"

With one hand on her chest and a butcher knife in the other, Maggie stammered, "In the...uh...the ballroom."

"Thanks."

"What's wrong?"

"Later," she called as she sprinted through the house. The urgency she felt was probably unnecessary, but she couldn't help it. If this whole thing turned out to be an April Fool's joke, she was going to be really pissed off.

Jordan and Pete were in the ballroom lining up reclining chairs and sofas from all over the house. Nickelback was playing on the stereo. Sarah stumbled to a stop just inside the huge room, unsure how to proceed.

Jordan saw her and began to smile, then straightened up as her face fell. "What is it, baby? What's wrong?"

Walking on wooden legs, Sarah made it to Jordan and gave her the paper she carried. "Please tell me this is a joke you set up."

Clearly confused, Jordan looked down at the document. Then she looked back up at Sarah. "This is my birth certificate."

It was all Sarah could do not to vomit from the fear she felt. "Shit."

"How did you get this?"

"A reporter gave it to me."

Jordan dropped down onto a sofa like her strings had been cut. One hand ran raggedly through her hair. "Well, I knew it had to happen someday."

Pete was suddenly there. "What's going on?"

Jordan handed Pete the certificate. "Some reporter has found me out."

Pete looked at the paper and snorted. "Francis? Your name is Francis?"

Jordan shot him a dirty look. "You have a problem with that, *Melvin*?"

Sarah looked up at the big man as he cringed. While she would have liked to tease him about his name to relieve some of the tension, she knew she had to tell Jordan the rest. Sitting down beside her lover, Sarah took a deep breath. "There's more. He knew that we are lovers," Sarah explained. "And...he asked me about the dungeon."

In that moment, Jordan's gaze could have cut diamonds. "What did he say?"

The menace coming from Jordan and Pete was nearly overwhelming. Sarah reminded herself that the menace was not directed at her personally. "He said he knew about it, but he thinks that *everyone* who comes here is a player. He was talking about elected officials and business people playing here."

"What did you say?" Pete growled.

"I lied, of course. I told him I was a maid and that I had been in every room of the house and there was no dungeon. I told him someone was yanking his chain, but I doubt he believed me. I didn't know what to do."

"Blackout?" Pete rumbled ominously.

Jordan took a deep breath. "The players will be coming in all night. I'll handle that. Focus on the dungeon. We've got some time before people get here, so get the obvious stuff out first."

"Where to? You never said."

"My office to start with."

"I'm on it."

Pete left the room at a run and Sarah watched him go in confusion. Her nerves were starting to get thin and she put her hands together to stop them from shaking. "What's going to happen?"

Jordan's face was still hard as a rock, but she put an arm around Sarah. "It's alright, baby. We've planned for this."

Being held was wonderful, but the fear was still there. "What's blackout?"

Jordan's face softened. "The dungeon will disappear and the players will be warned so they can protect themselves. I suppose I'll have to contact some of the non-players that have come here so they don't get blind-sided if it gets into the papers. Though, I can't imagine it will get that far. If there is no dungeon, there's no story. At least not one that affects anyone but me. I don't suppose there's anything I can do to stop them from printing my gender."

Sarah felt like Jordan's world was coming apart. She couldn't help the tears that leaked from her eyes. "Why is this happening?"

Jordan lifted Sarah's chin and wiped at the tears. "Don't cry, little one. It's not worth it. It's disappointing, to be sure, but not a disaster. Not at all."

"But now everyone will know that you're a woman. It's none of anybody's business. Why would he think the public has any right to know about you? They won't understand. All they will see is

what that reporter wants them to see. They won't see how amazing and wonderful you are. And why are you comforting me? *You're* the one getting exposed."

Jordan smiled. "I'm comforting you because you are the one who's upset. Maybe I'd have been more upset six months ago, but my cover has already been unraveling. People already know about me and I've had time to discover that I like being able to chose what gender I present at any given moment. Sure, some people are going to be upset or disturbed for one reason or another, but the people most important to me don't care. The most important people accept me and love me for what I am. Fuck the rest of them. If this reporter wants to tell the world, let him. At least I'll finally be *free*. Can you see that?"

She could. Sarah took a deep breath and tried to let go of the negative emotions that so overwhelmed her. "Why did you look so angry then?"

Jordan ran a hand through her hair again before answering. "In a couple of hours, the dungeon will look more like a social club than anything else. If that reporter tries to print that we have BDSM parties here, I'll be able to discredit both him and his paper. *Nothing* will come of his accusations. But the fact that he asked you about it means that someone's been talking to the wrong person. I may never find out the chain of information that ended with him. I was angry that my players ruined a good thing and that there's not much I can do about it. I'm not angry anymore, baby. The dungeon will disappear and we'll take a long break. After some time off, I'll decide if it's what I want to continue doing or not. On the other hand, I may have to eviscerate that reporter for scaring you and making you cry. What was his name?"

Sarah told Jordan everything she could remember about the conversation. Jordan asked a few questions for clarification and then stood up to pace. "Okay, as far as I can see, the only bits of story that he's going to be able to print are my gender and, possibly, our relationship. He can't print anything about the dungeon and players without independent confirmation. If he's trying to get it from you, he doesn't have it. The question now is: how do you feel about our relationship becoming public knowledge?"

Sarah considered it. "Well, I'm not against it, per se. I don't understand why anybody would care, but I worry that people will use it to try to hurt me."

"Like Lisa?"

"Yeah. But I'm not ashamed of you. I need you to believe that. It's just that how I feel about you makes me feel so vulnerable. I trust *you*...and a few others...but not most people."

Jordan nodded as she sat back down beside Sarah. "I understand, baby, and your concerns are valid. I want you to think about it and if you have any ideas about how you want me to protect us, let me know."

"I can protect us, too, you know."

"I do know," Jordan answered intently, "but as you stated so clearly not long ago, I am your Top."

I want you to be involved as far as you feel comfortable and safe, but the responsibility is mine. Understand?"

Sarah nodded reluctantly. "Okay. I get it."

"However," Jordan added. "I am in need of a little protecting right now and I think you are just the one to do it."

"How?"

"The dungeon gear needs a foolproof hiding place. The only one of any value is downstairs."

Comprehension was swift. "Your rooms."

"Yes. I can't prevent the guys from going down there, but I would appreciate it if you would..."

"Protect your privacy," Sarah interrupted.

Jordan looked relieved. "Exactly."

"I can do that."

"Thanks, baby."

Sarah put both hands up to Jordan's face and leaned in for a soft kiss. "I'm sorry this is happening."

"Me, too."

Sarah moved into Jordan's arms for a warm hug, but her mind was working things out. "Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

Sarah sat back, but kept a hold of her lover. "All that reporter needs to do is say that he's protecting a source and he can claim he has independent confirmation. He could print whatever he wants. We need to stop him from printing it at all, right?"

"That would be ideal, yes."

"We need to *prove* to him that there is no story."

"How do you suggest we do that?"

"Well, you said that the dungeon would disappear in a couple of hours."

"Yes?"

"Give him a tour."

Jordan's head tilted to one side and her eyes widened. "A tour."

"Call him. Tell him you heard that he was making accusations and offer to answer them. Let him see for himself that there is no dungeon. Cut him off at the knees."

"That could work," Jordan said thoughtfully.

"He could still write about you and I, but the players would be safer."

A slow smile crept onto Jordan's face. "I like it. If I call him now and tell him we can't meet until tomorrow morning because of the blood drive, it'll look even less like we have something to hide. The blood drive makes our 'get-togethers' look noble, not nefarious."

"You could tell him about the community service thing." Sarah was starting to get excited.

"Maybe you should stress how hard it's been to get permission. Turn his seedy story into one of underdogs. He probably won't print it, but it should really throw a wrench into the story he wants to write."

Jordan laughed and leaned in for a kiss. "We'll talk more about this later. We've got work to do. I've got to finish getting this room set up and you need to organize storing the dungeon equipment. We have a lot to do and not much time to do it."

A final kiss for luck and Sarah sprinted for Jordan's office. Blocking the door open, she triggered the secret door and ran downstairs. Looking around the front room, she thought that everything could be stored between the living room and kitchen. There was no reason for anyone to go any deeper into the apartment. Closing the doors to bedroom, office and gym, she then dragged Jordan's Lazyboy over to block the hallway. This way no one could sneak around while she wasn't looking.

"What the hell?"

Sarah heard Pete's voice from the office above and she looked around quickly to see if there was anything she needed to hide. She didn't notice anything. "Down here, Pete."

The big man entered the room with his arms full of a binding cross and his mouth hanging open. "I'll be god damned. I suspected, but...damn."

Sarah remembered feeling that way and it made her smile. "Let's fill up the kitchenette first. Jordan never uses it."

Cirenio backed into the room holding one end of a spanking stool. Leroy was carrying the other end. Both of them had the same wide-eyed look that Pete had sported. Sarah let them look for a few seconds and then directed them to the kitchen.

"How much more room do you think we'll need?" she asked Pete.

His eyes moved to her only reluctantly. "Most of it folds up or comes apart. There's more than enough room down here."

"Okay. I'll rearrange things a bit while you guys get the rest of it."

Sarah started to push the ratty old couch to one side as the men started back up the stairs. "Wait!"

Did she dare? Oh, yeah. "Take this with you."

"What?"

"This couch. Get rid of it. Jordan's been meaning to get a new one anyway. I don't care what you do with it. Just make it disappear."

Cirenio's eyes lifted. "Can I put it in the garage?"

Sarah waved at the old piece of furniture with a generous gesture. "Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday. It's all yours."

~***~

Two hours later it was done. At least, the part of it involving the basement apartment. The kitchen was completely buried and so was half of the living room. Boxes of toys and paddles filled in the spaces. It was as neat as Sarah could make it, but in reality, it was a mess. She'd directed things where they would fit, not with a mind to moving it all out.

She knew that the blood drive was underway upstairs. It wasn't loud, but she could hear people talking up there. Plus, the guys had been keeping her up to date. There were already a dozen people giving blood and more people were arriving all the time. Sarah wanted to check it out, but first she wanted to see the dungeon.

Closing the hidden door and locking Jordan's office, Sarah headed upstairs. The instant she entered the large room, she knew it would never work. It *looked* raw and unfinished. If Jordan walked in there with the reporter, he would know immediately what had been done.

Pete, Cirenio, Leroy and two other grounds-keepers, Brent and Adam, were basically scratching their heads about what to do next. The main room would be an easy fix. It was the alcoves that would give it all away as bogus. Ignoring the men, Sarah looked at each alcove and let her mind work. Soon it all started to come together.

"Pete?"

"Yes?"

Sarah pointed at three of the rooms. "These three rooms need tables and chairs."

"For what?"

Sarah pointed to the smallest room. "A small table and two chairs. Put a chess set on it." She pointed to the next room. "Table and four chairs. Board games. Cards. Poker chips. And that room needs a set up for puzzles or something. Put in some potted plants to make it look friendlier. Got it?"

Pete grinned in understanding. "Yes, ma'am."

She nodded as he grabbed two of the groundsmen and left the room. "Cirenio?"

He snapped to attention.

"That room...hmm. I know. There are two yoga mats underneath my bed in my house. I've also got some scented candles on my dining table. Bring them up here. And find a little altar-like table somewhere to put in there, too. I seem to remember a couple of beanbag chairs downstairs somewhere. Let's turn this into a meditation area."

"I'm on it."

There were two more rooms and Sarah stood between them as she tried to figure out what they should be. Leroy came up to stand beside her. "Any ideas?" she asked him.

"A reading room," he finally suggested.

Sarah looked at the older man with a smile. "Think you can make it happen?"

He sucked on his teeth before responding. "I reckon so."

"Thank you."

He nodded at her respectfully and turned away.

That left Sarah with one room. It was a bit larger than the other ones and Sarah was stumped. She tried to think what would make sense. The large room would be a communal area and possibly a dance floor. There would soon be game rooms, a reading room and an area for yoga. What else did a large group of people getting together to hang out need?

Sarah mulled it over as Pete and Brent came in with the table and chairs for the chess room. They arranged them and started to head out when Pete stopped.

"You okay?"

Sarah bit her lip before answering. "It would be too much to ask for a pool table, wouldn't it? Especially since there's a whole room for one downstairs. What about...air hockey?"

"Foosball?" Brent asked hopefully.

"Both," Pete said firmly.

"Excellent," Brent enthused.

"And a dart board," Sarah added. "Any chance those things are lying around somewhere?"

"No," Pete said slowly, "but I can have them here in an hour or two if you think we need them."

It meant spending Jordan's money. On the one hand, she didn't feel that she had the right to authorize expenditures with Jordan's money. On the other, she was pretty sure that Jordan would okay it without batting an eye. Weighing the two, Sarah made a decision. "Do it."

"Cool," Brent laughed triumphantly.

"Get a couple of bar stools and one of those tall cocktail tables while you're at it," Sarah added.

~***~

Two and a half hours later Sarah was laughing at Brent and Cirenio. They informed her that there was something wrong with the dart board and proceeded to fix it by sticking darts in the wall around it. They were right, of course, but the enthusiasm they were showing just struck her as funny.

Pete, Leroy and Adam were busy with a puzzle-trying to make it look like a work in progress. Somehow Pete had come up with nearly two dozen slightly used puzzles that were stacked in a corner of the room. The same was true of the room for board games. Both rooms looked like they saw regular use.

Leroy had outdone himself on the reading room. In addition to a love seat and two chairs, there was a full bookcase and a stack of magazines that made the room work.

The dungeon now looked as if it had never been a dungeon. Of course, there could have been more art on the walls and the black/red color scheme was a bit overblown, but it worked.

Sarah was exhausted and very hungry. She knew that there would be more work later to make sure the main floor didn't look as though it had been raped, but the hardest part was done. She could take a few minutes off now to just relax and bask in their accomplishment.

Several players walked in and their mouths dropped open at the changes. Sarah took it as a compliment. "Welcome! Come on in and have a look around."

"Wow," one of the women breathed. "This is great. It looks totally different."

The man nodded in agreement as his eyes swept the room. "Jordan is looking for...Foosball!"

Sarah laughed at him. All of the men were excited by the new game table. "Why don't you play for a while? Have some fun."

"Thanks. I will."

There was nothing else she could do for the dungeon. It was time to find Jordan and get something to eat before her belly caved in.

"Lady Sarah."

She turned towards Pete at the sound of her name and saw him stand up. Leroy stood up as well and Adam followed hastily. "What?"

Pete bowed to her somberly and the other two men followed suit. Shocked, she glanced over at the new game tables and saw Cirenio and Brent doing the same. Embarrassed, she made a face. "Oh, shut up."

All five men broke into smiles and Sarah blushed under the curious eyes of the players. She made her escape before any more could be said.

The mood downstairs was a little more somber. People were talking quietly in small groups and Sarah could see worry in their faces. They did not seem to be panicking, but they were definitely concerned. Some of them wore stickers on their chests signifying that they had already donated blood. Several of them said a quiet 'thank you' as she passed by. Sarah supposed that Jordan had been telling them that she was busy changing the dungeon.

The ballroom certainly looked different. There must have been twenty people in white smocks in the room drawing blood, going over paperwork and monitoring equipment. It looked like a modern day war effort. There were tables to one side bearing bottles of juice and trays of fruits and vegetables. Sarah's belly led her over immediately. She ate three carrot sticks before the taste even hit her tongue.

"Have you signed up?"

Sarah swallowed as she turned to face a much older woman. "Not yet. I have some things to take care of first. I'm looking for Jordan. Have you seen him?"

"He's meeting with people as they arrive to discuss business, I believe. One of the rooms by the front door." She held out a printed paper and a pen. "If you like, you can fill this out and bring it back when you're ready. It will save you time."

Sarah took them with a smile. "Thanks."

"No, thank *you*."

Tucking the paper and pen in her back pocket, Sarah grabbed a handful of cherry tomatoes and a nice, fat strawberry. On her way to Jordan, Sarah could see that someone had been rearranging the downstairs all along. Not counting the missing furniture that was now in the ballroom, she could see that some things had been rearranged. Someone not familiar with the house would never know that all had been subtly moved. It certainly made the rest of the day seem easier.

Popping tomatoes like grapes, Sarah quietly opened the door to what she thought of as the First Room and peeked inside.

"...Business as usual," Jordan was saying. "If you stop showing up it will be suspicious. If we want it to look like we get together to be social, then we need to get together and be social. Without a dungeon we have nothing to hide. Nothing will come of this."

Sarah eased inside the room and gently closed the door. Several people saw her and smiled. Sarah smiled back as Jordan turned to see what they were looking at. There was a question in her eyes and Sarah spoke to it. "The dungeon is gone."

"Already?"

"Well, the color scheme is a bit dark and gloomy, but I think you'll like it. The guys did a great job."

Everyone in the room relaxed. Sarah ate another tomato.

Jordan clapped her hands in satisfaction. "Well! We can talk more about this later. I just wanted to bring you all up to speed. Don't panic. That's the big thing. There is no dungeon and there never was. Do what you need to do to protect yourselves, but I think this is all going to turn out to be smoke in the wind. And remember, there's an announcement tonight after the vampires leave. I'd like as many people as possible to be there, but it's not necessary. If you're not here, I'll call you later and fill you in."

A few minutes later, Sarah and Jordan were alone. "Why does everyone keep thanking me?" Sarah asked. "What did you tell them?"

Jordan flopped down in a chair with a groan. "For saving the day."

"Excuse me?"

Jordan patted her leg in invitation. "If you hadn't told me about the reporter and it had hit the papers without warning, it would have been a nightmare for everyone. You saved the day."

Sarah sat down and leaned back into Jordan's embrace. "Pfft. Anyone would have done it."

"Nope. Just you. Half a dozen people have quietly admitted that someone's been asking questions."

Sarah was shocked. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. From the sound of it, the guy hasn't identified himself as a reporter. He approaches them in a bar or café and strikes up a conversation. He buys them drinks and muses about the lack of a place to play. The players blew him off and forgot about it."

"Okay," Sarah conceded, "that sounds weird, but reasonable."

"Seems like."

"Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

"What a bunch of maroons," she said in her best Bugs Bunny voice. Jordan started to laugh. Sarah smiled at the sound. "What's the big announcement later?"

"The great reveal."

"Huh?"

"The gender issue. I'm going to tell them all at once."

"Oh." Sarah sighed. "I wish you didn't have to do that."

"I'm kind of looking forward to it. Might be fun."

Sarah shifted her head to one side so she could look up at Jordan. "You're not going to show them your breasts, are you?"

"I hope not," Jordan chuckled.

"Good."

"Feeling a little possessive?"

"They're mine. All mine." Sarah put the tip of the strawberry into her mouth and bit into it. The sweetness all but melted in her mouth and she groaned in pleasure. It was a big piece of fruit and she held the rest up for Jordan to taste.

"Yum," Jordan hummed. "That's good."

It would have been so easy to close her eyes and take a nap, but Sarah could hear faint sounds

outside the room of new people arriving. That meant Jordan still had more explaining to do. "What a day."

"And it isn't over yet."

Sarah groaned in response to that thought. "I should probably tell you that I had Pete spend money for you today."

"Okay. For what?"

"An air hockey table. Dart board. Foosball table."

"Foosball?"

Sarah shook her head at the excited tone. "I don't get it. Everyone's excited about the foosball."

"I *love* foosball."

"You would," Sarah teased as she stood up.

"It's so *violent*," Jordan said excitedly.

Sarah patted the lean belly as Jordan rose to her feet. "Sometimes you're such a guy."

Jordan winked and they went back to work.

~***~

It occurred to Sarah as her blood was flowing down a tube that they have forgotten something very important. It was the kind of thing that most people wouldn't notice right away, but a reporter would catch it.

Sarah turned her head towards Jordan who was giving blood only a few feet away. "Hey. Where do you sleep?" she asked in a whisper.

"Depends on where you're sle..." Jordan's eyes abruptly showed her understanding. "Ooo. Good catch."

Sarah smiled. "We'll take care of it later."

"The green room okay with you?"

"Sure."

Jordan shook her head as she stared up at the ceiling. "Damn. Such an obvious thing and I missed it. Could have blown the whole thing."

"Well, in your defense, this might have been a whole lot easier if it was the *only* thing we had to do today."

"Good point." Jordan turned to look at her with a very serious mein. "I couldn't have done this without you, Sarah."

"I was just helping out."

"I mean it. You have no idea. You really stepped up to the plate for me today. I couldn't have done it without you. It would have gotten done, but not half as well or as efficiently. Upstairs...what you did up there is nothing short of amazing. It looks great."

"I had a lot of help."

"You had muscle, baby. Organizing it and making it look so damn good was all you. The guys know it. They're giving you all the credit."

Sarah blushed in embarrassment and pride.

"What you did today gave me the time and space to make this blood drive happen and to talk with everyone about what's going on. I could have done this or what you did, but there's no way in hell I could have done both on the same day, let alone simultaneously. *Thank you.*"

Jordan's sincerity was like being hit with a sonic boom. To be honestly appreciated and acknowledged for her efforts was very emotional for her. Sarah blinked through the tears that filled her eyes. "I'm glad I could help."

"Are you going to cry?"

Sarah shook her head and wiped at a tear that betrayed her. "I'm just happier than usual."

~***~

It was just after 9:30 by the time the blood drive people left. There were just shy of a hundred people gathered in the shambles of the ball room when Jordan walked in with one of her special vests tucked under her arm. The air in the room was casual and folks were seated on anything that would hold them. Sarah was the only one who knew that ten minutes before, Jordan had been throwing up in the bathroom. Jordan could say that she was all right with this happening, but Sarah knew how nervous she was.

"Is everyone here?" Jordan queried the room. "Nobody's upstairs making love to the foosball table?"

Most everyone laughed about that.

"This is everyone," Pete calmly said over the noise.

Jordan nodded. She looked tired, but she stood tall and straight. Sarah stepped closer, wishing she could just hug Jordan and make it all go away. She was aware that Pete, Maggie and Amanda were also moving closer in support. The rest of Jordan's employees stood in a group not far away. Prior to the blood drive, Jordan had informed them all of her true gender. They had all been shocked, but in the end, none of them cared. They were all here now because they were feeling a little protective. Sarah had spoken to most of them and was impressed with their loyalty.

"As I said earlier," Jordan began, "nothing is going to come of this reporter's story. He can't print what he can't prove. I have no doubt that you are all safe from being exposed in the paper. However, there is something else he can prove that I probably can't stop him from printing. It will not threaten or embarrass you unless you let it, but it's something you need to know so you don't get blind-sided."

Everyone looked curious, but no one said anything.

"I'm hoping you will all be open-minded about this." Jordan took a deep breath of uncertainty and ran a hand through her hair. "I've...there's something about me that I've kept from all of you. I had a lot of reasons. In retrospect, I'm not sure how good my reasons really were, but they made sense at the time and it just became a habit and then I sort of became trapped by it. I think I would have told you about it sooner or later, but I'm pretty sure it's going to hit the papers."

The rambling was so unlike Jordan. Sarah reached out and put a hand on Jordan's arm. When the tall woman looked down at her, Sarah took a deep breath and let it out. Jordan followed suit. "Just tell them," Sarah whispered.

Jordan rolled her head on her shoulders and held out the vest. "This is a vest designed by a friend of mine. He works as a costume designer in Hollywood." She unzipped the vest and exposed the inside. "It's made for a woman to wear so that she can appear as a man. He made it for me. I'm wearing one right now. I'm a woman."

A slender man in the middle of the crowd shot to his feet with both arms pumping. "Yes, yes, yes! I knew it! You all thought I was crazy, but I was right! Fuck, yeah! Money in the bank!"

Some faces were laughing at the young man's display, while others were gaping like fish. The young man pulled out his wallet and held it open. "The money goes right here, folks! Don't be shy! Come to papa!"

"Are you shitting me? You really are a woman?"

This came from a woman right up front. She looked as if she weren't sure if she should be shocked, amused or angry.

Suddenly everyone seemed to be talking, laughing or asking questions. Sarah looked up at

Jordan and saw that her lover seemed to be the most stunned person in the room. Moving her hand to Jordan's back, she watched Jordan shake her head, put two fingers in her mouth and let out a shrill whistle. The room quieted.

"How many of you knew?"

About a quarter of the room raised their hands. One woman in the back laughed. "Well, we didn't *know*, but we had our suspicions. Except for Jackson there."

The young man blew on his knuckles and rubbed them on his shirt. "Oh yeah. I knew right from the start."

"How?" Jordan asked.

Jackson posed with one hand on his hip, his twinkling eyes raking over Jordan's body. "I've got to tell you, Jordan, you are the absolute best drag king I've ever seen and without doubt the finest example of a man I have ever met, but men are my bread and butter. You've got it all in spades, honey, but no matter how good you work it, you just don't make little Jack stand up and dance."

Jordan chuckled. "I think there was a compliment in there somewhere."

Jackson inclined his head gracefully. "It is truly an honor to know you, Master Crisp. To be included in your circle of friends is a gift beyond price."

Jordan returned the graceful nod. "It is an honor to know you as well, Jackson. No circle of friends would be complete without you."

For that moment, it was almost like watching a king acknowledging the fealty of a vassal. It was noble and elegant in the extreme. When the moment passed, Jordan was clearly back in control. He looked over at the still gaping woman in the front row. "I really am a woman, Edie."

"Why did you lie?"

Jordan held her arms out to the side. "Look at me. Can you picture me dressed as a woman? It's not pretty. Even without the vest most people think I am a man. I've just encouraged people to see me in the way that makes them most comfortable. That was my original intent when I began to wear the vest. It made my life seem easier not having to deal with the confusion and disgust my appearance prompted."

"Did you think we would care? *Us*?"

"No. Was I wrong? Does it bother you?"

Edie looked angry now. "It's the lie, Jordan. We trusted you and you didn't trust us. How are we supposed to feel about that?"

The man next to her shrugged. "Doesn't bother me none. Besides, *Master* Crisp was never in a position where trusting us was an issue. It's the Dungeon Master's job to protect us from ourselves when we are most likely to be untrustworthy. He's done a hell of a job."

"*She*," Edie hissed.

"*He*," the man stated calmly. "When he looks like a man, he's a man. When she looks like a woman, she's a woman. You know that. You're just pissed off because you were hot for a woman and you didn't know it. April Fool's, Miss *I'm-strictly-straight*."

A number of people started laughing as Edie's eyes widened. As they narrowed in anger, Edie stepped forward and grabbed Jordan between her legs.

Jordan smiled. Edie gaped stupidly. Sarah saw red. Jordan wasn't wearing anything in her boxers. Even if she had been, Sarah didn't want anyone touching her there. Grabbing Edie's wrist, she yanked the hand away and pushed.

"Don't," she warned as Edie stumbled back. "Don't you touch him. She's mine." She could hear how intense she sounded and it felt good. "She's *mine*."

Edie seemed to shrink in on herself. "You can have her."

"Your loss," Sarah snorted. She turned her back on the crowd and found a huge grin on Jordan's face. "Are you all right?"

"Gettin' better all the time, babe."

"Don't be smug," she warned quietly.

"No ma'am."

Jordan was going to be insufferable. Sarah could tell. She decided to escape before it got truly embarrassing. "I think you've got this under control. I'm going to fix the green room."

"I'll help you with that."

"You're busy here. Anything special you want moved up there?"

"Just use your best judgement. I trust you."

Sarah smiled as they shared a gentle kiss.

~***~

It was just after one when Jordan finally stumbled into the green bedroom. Sarah looked up from the textbook she was skimming. "Is it over?"

"Finally." Jordan kicked off her shoes and began unbuttoning her shirt. "I thought they'd never leave."

"You look tired."

"I am. You must be exhausted."

"Close." Sarah set her book on the night stand. "Was everyone okay when they left?"

"Yeah, for the most part. They'll work it out."

Sarah enjoyed the strip show on two levels. It was always erotic to watch all that soft, beautiful skin emerge. On the other hand, the casual way Jordan was tossing clothes and pocket detritus helped make the room look more realistic.

"I'm going to take a quick shower."

"Okay."

Sarah could see the shower from the bed and she relaxed with her hands behind her head to watch. Jordan-in-the-shower had to be on God's top ten list for best creations of all time. Jordan-brushing-her-teeth-wearing-only-a-towel-around-her-waist was on the list, too.

It wasn't long before Jordan slid into bed beside Sarah and possessively pulled her close. "If I had any energy left at all, I'd make love to you until you begged me to stop."

Sarah smiled and closed her eyes. "If I had enough energy left to have an orgasm, I'd let you."

"You rock."

"You roll."

Jordan abruptly sat up and turned on the bedside light. She looked around the room very carefully.

"What is it?" Sarah asked with concern.

"I didn't even realize I wasn't in my room."

Sarah chuckled and rearranged her pillow. "Good. I set the alarm for 7:45. Is that enough time to get ready for the reporter?"

"Yeah." Jordan shut off the light and curled around Sarah. "Thanks, little one."

"You're welcome, love."

~***~

Sarah wanted to stay to see how it went with the reporter, but Jordan insisted she go to school. She said that it was her responsibility and that she was going to spend most of the day on the phone explaining her gender to her non-player associates. Sarah understood, but she couldn't help feeling disappointed. It would have been great fun watching how Jordan handled the weasel in his quest for a story.

She stopped at a small, locally-owned coffee shop on her way to the University for an extra large cup of motivation. It was a beautiful morning. It had been getting steadily warmer for the last month and she enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her skin. She wished that she could spend hours just soaking it in.

Janet was in Sarah's first class of the day and Sarah found her friend waiting for her outside of the building. "Good morning."

"Hey," Janet grimaced. "Are you ready for the quiz?"

Sarah had forgotten, but she didn't really care. It wouldn't count towards her grade and the questions she missed, if any, would help focus her studying where she needed it most. "Probably not," she admitted. "I didn't study at all yesterday."

"You? Not study? Oh God, it's Armageddon! And look at my hair! I'm so not ready!"

They laughed together and Sarah explained. "We had a blood drive at the big house last night. Tons of people were there. I helped keep everything organized. The last people didn't leave until well after midnight."

"Did you give blood, too?"

"Yes."

"I wish I'd known. I would have done it, too."

Sarah grinned. "You just want to see inside the big house."

"Well, there is that."

Sarah bumped shoulders with her friend. "The next one is July first. If you're still here..."

"I'll be home by then," Janet interrupted. "I'll be working with my dad on my store."

"You can donate blood anywhere," Sarah informed her. "You can do it every three months. It doesn't take long and it doesn't hurt or anything. It feels kind of good to know that I'm helping people I've never met. Like being an invisible hero."

They separated for a moment to avoid a young man barreling down the steps and then moved back together. "Are you still dating that guy?" Sarah asked. "I can't remember his name."

Janet shrugged. "Matt. Yes, but it's not going anywhere. I really like him, but I think all we'll really be are friends. Besides, I'm moving in a couple of months. It wouldn't be fair to get serious and then ditch him. What about you and Jordan? How are things going?"

"Great. Actually, I guess I can tell you now."

"Tell me what?"

Sarah leaned a little closer. "Jordan is really a woman."

Janet threw her head back in a laugh. "Nice try, Sarah. April Fool's was yesterday."

Sarah gazed placidly into Janet's eyes as they walked and waited for her to accept it.

"No way."

"Way."

Janet's eyes got really big. "That...that...*hunk*...is a woman? Boobs and everything? Holy shit!"

Sarah tried to shush her. It wasn't a secret anymore, but it still wasn't something she wanted yelled out in a crowd.

"He's a woman?"

"Yes."

"A real one?"

Sarah just gave her a look.

"You know what I mean," Janet backpedaled. "It's just that he's such a freaking stud. You could put him on the cover of GQ. He's hot."

"I know, but Jordan is really a woman."

"Wow." Janet made an odd face. "Hey, since I thought she was so hot, does that make me a lesbian?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "As a matter of fact, it does."

"Gosh, and I didn't even know. Does Jordan have a *sister*?"

Sarah knew she was being teased by the waggle of dark eyebrows. It made her laugh. "Come on, you dork. We don't want to be late for class."

"Does Tamar know?"

"Not yet."

"Can I tell her? Please, please, please? Ya' gotta let me tell her."

Sarah couldn't see a reason to deny her. "Okay."

"Woohoo!"

"But, you have to tell her that you only found out first because I saw you first. Today was the first day I could tell anyone."

"How come?"

"Oh yeah. I didn't tell you about the reporter." Sarah turned into their classroom.

"What reporter?" Janet asked from the doorway.

"I'll tell you after class."

~***~

There was an amazing old oak tree covering the lawn outside the physical sciences building. Sarah would not have been at all surprised to learn that it was older than the University itself. The oak was a perfect place to spend time on a warm spring afternoon. Sarah was lying under its shade with Janet and Tamar.

Both of her friends were brimming with curiosity about Jordan and Sarah was enjoying the chance to talk about her favorite subject. Of course, there was much she did not tell them, but there were plenty of stories she could tell. The two young women were quite charmed by Jordan's Christmas Day ritual of leaving seeds out for the wildlife. They thought it peculiar how Jordan had thrown up in the Jaguar and then sold it to Sarah for a pittance. They laughed over Jordan's owie in her tussle with Pete.

"Who's Pete?" Tamar asked.

"Um...He's kind of a cross between a butler and an accounts manager for the house. He's the biggest guy I've ever seen, but he's really sweet. His wife is my friend, too. Her name is Amanda. You'd like her. She teaches kindergarten."

Janet leaned back on her hands, letting her long hair cascade down her back. "You go back and

forth a lot between he and she when you talk about Jordan."

"She's both," Sarah said simply. "Sometimes she's a man and sometimes he's a woman."

"And you don't find that confusing?"

"No. I don't care what Jordan is. Man or woman, I love them the same."

"You might not feel that way if he really was a man."

"Why not?"

"Penis? Hello?"

Sarah wrapped her arms around her knees with a smile. "I was nervous about that for quite a while, but not any more." Both women gaped at her with their mouths hanging open and it made her laugh. "What can I say? I like intercourse. Don't you?"

"Sometimes," Tamar admitted with a shrug.

Janet peered around before answering. "I don't mind it, but I can't come that way."

"You just haven't met the right guy," Tamar said to Janet. "I've had good *and* bad. Mostly leaning towards bad, but the good ones are really good."

"How many men have you been with?" Janet asked.

"I'll tell you if you tell me."

Janet blushed. "Two."

"Eight."

Both of them turned to look at Sarah and she held her hands up in protest. "I made no promises."

"Come on," Janet pleaded.

"I'm guessing no men at all," Tamar speculated.

"Just Jordan," Sarah conceded.

"How many women?" Janet pressed.

Sarah's blush stung. "A lot."

"A lot like...what? Give it up, Sarah. You gotta tell us. That's what girlfriends are for. Right,

Tamar?"

"Absofrickinlutely."

Sarah rubbed at her face with both hands. "I don't know, okay?"

"You don't know?" Janet looked scandalized, and loving every minute of it. "Are we talking more than ten?"

"Oh yeah," Sarah snorted.

"Twenty?"

She gave them an embarrassed thumbs-up to indicate a higher number.

"More?" Janet looked to be on the verge of swallowing her tongue.

It was a toss-up. Sarah was ashamed of her sexual history, but she also really wanted to tell them. She thought it was pretty likely that she was going to break down, so there really wasn't any point in fighting it. "Like I said, I'm not really sure, but maybe as...fifty."

Janet's eyes bugged out and Tamar made a prim face. "You *slut*."

Sarah knew she was being teased, but in that moment she understood completely why Jordan had chased Pete outside and made him eat dirt. Before she had time to think better of it, she was straddling Tamar and tickling her for all she was worth. She had never acted like this with anyone except Jordan, but Janet and Tamar were playing right back.

"What's next? Sex in the Student Union?"

Sarah flipped off of Tamar in a flash and looked up at the unwelcome speaker.

"Really," Lisa sneered haughtily, "I didn't expect the two of you to turn into lesbians so quickly."

Sarah glanced at her friends and saw anger.

"Fuck off," Tamar answered. "We were just playing around."

"Exactly my point."

"What's the matter, Lisa? Run out of kittens to torture?"

Lisa sniffed at the insult and looked down at Sarah. "What's the matter, Sarah? Jordan not enough man for you? Oh, wait...I nearly forgot. He's *not* a man."

It took a moment for one little fact to surface and Sarah stiffened. "That's right. He's not a man,

but then, how did you know that?" She looked at her friends. "Did either of you...?"

They shook their heads in denial and Sarah believed them. She stood up and folded her arms to keep from strangling her ex-study-partner. "How did you find out?"

Lisa laughed. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Gee, I haven't heard anyone use that line since I was about ten. I guess it's too much to ask that you act like an adult." Sarah cocked her head to one side and thought about it. "Since we didn't tell you, it could only have been that slimy reporter."

Lisa frowned. "He's not slimy."

Sarah knew she had hit a nerve and decided to keep poking it and see what fell out. "If you had actually met him in person you would know that he is. He's the worst kind of reporter: the kind that will make up a story just to start shit and ruin innocent lives. He doesn't care if he hurts people and lies are his trademark. He's scum."

Sarah saw Lisa's hand coming in an open-handed slap and did nothing to stop it. The slap stung, but it didn't rock her back at all. She smiled. "Is that all you got?"

She let Lisa slap her again and then Tamar pushed her way between them, sending Lisa back several steps.

"You gonna slap me, too?" Tamar snarled.

Sarah put a hand on Tamar's shoulder. "Don't worry. If she does, it doesn't hurt."

"You know," Janet said as she slipped an arm around Sarah's waist, "if you had gone ahead and ripped her arm off before, she wouldn't have been able to hit you at all."

"True," Sarah said calmly. She cocked her head to one side. "You talked to that reporter and told him about Jordan and me. What I can't figure out is why he would listen to you whine and then act on it. Are you sleeping with him?"

"No!"

"Because, honestly, you'd be better off masturbating. He didn't look like he could get it up anyway."

"*Shut up!*" Lisa shrieked. "*Shut up!* Don't you talk about him like that! You don't know him!"

"Eww," Tamar grimaced. "She *is* sleeping with him."

Janet mimed sticking her finger down her throat and Sarah had to laugh. Yes, it was a tense situation and she had not yet committed herself to allowing Lisa to walk away unharmed, but her

friends were backing her up like they had practiced it.

"I am *not* sleeping with him! He's my uncle, for god's sake! That would be disgusting! You guys don't know how sick Sarah is! They do S&M! She's a pervert! Ask her!"

"Of course she's a pervert," Tamar snorted. "She's a lesbian."

Sarah had experienced a moment of fear at Lisa's accusation, but Tamar's comment had dispelled it. She remembered reading once that the best lies were composed of truth. "She's right."

Janet gasped. "What?"

"Sure," Sarah added casually. "Jordan ties me up and beats me all the time. It's the only way I can get off. In fact, those little love pats have got me all hot and bothered, Lisa. Are you going to finish what you started?"

Lisa stiffened in anger and turned to flounce off. Tamar and Janet dissolved into giggles. Sarah just stood there.

It was her fault that Jordan was being outted. If she hadn't invited the girls out to her house, she and Lisa would never have had that confrontation. Lisa would not have felt slighted and would not have started her uncle on Jordan's trail. Even if Jordan was glad of all the changes, they should have been a choice and not a necessity.

Maybe it wasn't fair to blame herself. After all, Lisa was Lisa. She seemed to be the type of person who always had a good reason to be mean. Still, Sarah couldn't help feeling like the situation was at least partially her fault.

"I just can't figure out why she's always got to be such a bitch to Sarah," Janet said.

"She's jealous," Tamar announced. "She'll never be as pretty, as smart or as nice as Sarah and it pisses her off. I think she's used to being the princess."

Sarah blushed as she looked at her friends. "I'm not perfect, you know."

"Right," Tamar snorted in amusement. "And how, exactly, are you not perfect?"

"Well, like you said, I'm a slut."

"Did I say that? What I meant was...irresistible."

"I'm gullible."

"Trusting. It's a fine quality that so few people have nowadays."

Tamar looked smug and Janet was grinning ear to ear. Sarah folded her arms stubbornly,

determined to win this. "I'm too reserved."

"Modesty is a virtue."

"I'm not spontaneous."

"You're reliable."

"Like a rock," Janet added.

"I'm emotionally naive."

"Innocence is a rare and beautiful thing."

Sarah frowned. She could see how this was going. No matter what she said, they would make it sound like a good thing. Still, she had to try. "I'm afraid of almost everything."

"In this day and age, to be cautious is to be wise."

"I'm socially retarded."

"But, we like that about you."

Sarah burst out laughing. "You guys are so full of shit."

"Wow," Janet breathed with wide eyes. "She's got x-ray vision, too."

"When I grow up," Tamar gushed, "I want to be just like you."

"Short?" Janet asked.

"Well, not *that*."

Sarah lifted her chin defiantly. "I'm not short. I'm compact."

Janet made a face. "No, you're just short."

Sarah ended up at the bottom of the pile, laughing hysterically as her friends found most of her tickle spots.

~***~

Jordan wasn't there when Sarah got home, but she found a note from her on the coffee table. It took her a few minutes to decipher the messy scrawl of Jordan's handwriting. Apparently, she had been called in to an unscheduled meeting in town and would be home as soon as possible. Sarah left the note on the table and decided to take a shower. Roughhousing on the grass had

been fun, but left her a bit sweaty. Not to mention that she probably still had grass in her underwear from a handful Janet had managed to inflict on her.

Sarah's thoughts turned to Lisa's revelations as hot water massaged her scalp. She still wanted to strangle the selfish bitch. It was hard to understand what Lisa thought she had to gain from instigating trouble for Jordan and Sarah. She had a pretty good idea that Jordan wouldn't actually be angry with her over Lisa's vindictiveness, but Sarah was still dreading the telling.

After her shower, Sarah put on a t-shirt and a pair of shorts, and sat down to do some homework. It was hard to concentrate, but she got quite a bit done over the next hour and a half.

Not knowing what time Jordan would be home made it difficult to decide on what to make for dinner. After several minutes of staring into her refrigerator, Sarah decided to go and see if Maggie was cooking.

The only one home next door was Marmalade. Sarah spent a few minutes scratching his head and then walked up to the big house. She had to smile when she found Maggie staring into the refrigerator much like she had been doing just a short time before.

"Hi, Maggie."

"Hello, dear."

Sarah stepped up next to her old friend and stared with her. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for something to jump out and say 'cook me'."

"Yeah. I tried that at my house. Had about the same amount of luck with it, too."

"I thought about take-out, but nothing sounded good."

Sarah agreed. "Do you have any idea what time Jordan will be back?"

"He said he'd do his best to be back by eight, but he didn't sound very hopeful."

"We've got lots of time then. What's the oldest thing in there?"

Maggie leaned over to check. "Well, this chicken has about two days left and we should probably make a salad before something starts to rot. The milk is on the edge, too."

"Okay. Sounds like chicken and salad for dinner. I'm not sure what to do with the milk."

"How about fried chicken? We can make gravy with the trimmings and use up the milk."

Sarah rubbed her belly with a grin. "You're gonna make me fat."

"All of the most beautiful women have a few extra pounds, dear. It makes them look more feminine. Not that you have any trouble with that, mind you, but you could gain a bit and still look wonderful."

Sarah blushed. Compliments were still a weakness for her. She just didn't know how to accept them casually. "Well, thanks. What can I do to help?"

While gathering ingredients they discovered that they were low on potatoes, so Maggie set some rice to steaming. Sarah had never tried rice with gravy so it sounded a bit odd, but starch was starch. There was no reason in the world why rice couldn't have gravy on it. She would try it when it was ready. Maggie showed her how to cut apart a chicken and it was soon frying on the stove. They worked together on making the salad while Maggie filled her in on the reporter's morning visit.

To hear her tell it, Richard Westman had been surly, rude and unconvinced. He had questioned everything he saw, including the staff. His tour had taken place while the ballroom was being cleaned after the blood drive and he decided that it was an elaborate ruse to deceive him. No room went unchecked and he even insisted on examining the outbuildings. Except for Maggie and Sarah's cottages, he was given free rein on the estate, but he left as convinced of his story as when he had arrived. His attitude had so incensed Pete that Jordan had given him the rest of the day off.

The food was just about ready when they heard the front door slam. They glanced at each other just as they heard a heartfelt "Fuck!"

"Uh oh," Maggie said. "Sounds like it didn't go well."

The wise thing to do was probably to wait for Jordan to find them and tell them what was wrong. But Sarah couldn't do that. Just knowing that Jordan was upset made her stomach hurt and she wanted to fix it. Rinsing her hands and drying them on a towel, Sarah left the kitchen.

She found the tall woman at a bar in one of the sitting rooms, a shot glass in one hand and a bottle of amber liquid in the other. Sarah watched as one drink was knocked back and another was poured. She swallowed nervously before speaking. "What's wrong?"

Jordan drank the second shot and poured another. Setting the decanter roughly aside, she turned to face Sarah, anger blazing from her face. "They kicked me off the board."

"What?"

"Oh, they didn't say it like that. They unanimously agreed that I should resign. For the good of the community."

"Who?"

"The women's shelter," Jordan spat. Her long legs began to pace. "They are ever so grateful for

all I've done, but they have an image to maintain. Having someone *like me* on the board will apparently make battered women think twice about getting help."

Sarah was stunned. "That's ridiculous."

"*Fuck!*"

Jordan's outburst nearly sent Sarah running for the door, but she made herself stand still. "They can't do that."

"Well, they did." Jordan lifted her glass and then lowered it. "I'm the one that bought the facility for them and got it started. You know what they did before that? They gave women a night or two at a motel...when they could afford it. *I'm the one* who made it possible for them to give women and children a place to stay until they could get on their feet. *I'm the one* who gave them the room to offer counseling, legal aid and job training. *I'm the one* who worked my ass off getting the staff together and the grants written. The only reason they exist is because of me. And how do they repay me? They fucking kick me off the board!"

All she could do was stand there. Sarah couldn't think of a thing to say. It just didn't make any sense. How could an organization dedicated to helping women turn on a woman like that? It's not like Jordan had committed a crime.

"Oh, and the frosting on the cake is that they hope I'll still be one of their contributors. They don't want me, but they'll take my money. Those bitches."

"They actually said that? That they want your money?"

"Yep. They sure did. Gotta give them credit for having ovaries."

"That's...That's bullshit, Jordan. It's just wrong."

"No kidding." Jordan drank the shot and set the glass down on a coffee table. Stuffing her hands into her pockets, she continued to pace angrily. "What really pisses me off is that I can't just stop giving them money."

"Why not?"

"It'll hurt the women who come to them for help. About fifteen percent of their donations come out of my pocket. If the shelter makes less money through donations, they'll cut services before anyone on the staff loses money. Most of the board is comprised of staff. If I continue to donate, the board goes on business as usual. If I stop donating, the women who need the shelter will suffer, but the board won't. I'm caught in a Catch-22."

"Is there any way you can donate only for specific things?"

"No. All donations go into a general fund. Everything is drawn from that fund." Jordan dropped

into a chair and put her face in her hands. "I didn't expect this. I feel like I've been blindsided. I don't know what to do."

Sarah felt like her heart was breaking. She moved to stand before her lover and ran her hands through Jordan's short hair. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

Jordan reached out to pull Sarah into her arms and hugged her tightly. "Thanks, baby. It helps to have you near."

Sarah held Jordan's head beneath her breasts. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying. She had to tell Jordan about Lisa. Maybe the timing was bad, but she had to do it. "I have to tell you something, Jordan."

"Okay."

Sarah took a deep breath and slowly released it. "I saw Lisa today. It turns out that she is Richard Westman's niece."

Jordan's arms remained tight, but she pulled her head back. She looked to one side for a long moment and then sighed. "That fills in some blanks."

"I'm sorry, Jordan."

The tall woman looked up in concern, her eyes searching Sarah's face. "I'm not the only one who got blindsided today, am I?"

Tears abruptly streamed down Sarah's face. Her throat tightened and speaking became very difficult. "I didn't know, Jordan. If I had, I never would have invited her over."

"Whoa," Jordan said softly. "Do you think this was your fault?"

Sarah wiped ineffectually at her tears, sobs leaking from her heart. "Not my fault, but I...facilitated..."

"No, baby, no. I don't think you did. Not at all. Come here."

Sarah ended up in Jordan's lap, curled up into her chest as she struggled not to weep.

"Listen to me, little one. I found out a few things today that make the picture a little clearer. First of all, the birth certificate you gave me yesterday was requested before we met. When they release a birth certificate it has to be dated and stamped by the county recorder to authenticate it. That date was last June. He was looking at me for a story almost a year ago. He's known that I'm a woman for a long time."

"What?"

"It's true, baby. I contacted my lawyers about it. There's going to be an investigation into exactly how he got it without my approval or assistance. I suspect that Mr. Weston is going to discover that he's been digging himself a hole while he's been investigating me."

Sarah began to feel some hope.

"I also learned that his editor won't let him print it unless he has a damn good reason. My gender isn't enough to justify the story."

"Good."

Jordan wiped away some of Sarah's tears and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Now that we know Lisa is his niece, a few more things become quite likely. Were you and Lisa at all friendly before she approached you about the study group?"

Sarah shook her head. "We knew each other in passing, but that was about it."

"It might be that Richard Westman put his niece up to getting close to you in the hope that something would shake loose."

It all started clicking into place. The unexpected invitation to start a study group. Lisa's casual, yet persistent, questions about her job and employer. The frequent requests for an invitation to the estate. Lisa's ridiculous attempt to seduce Jordan. It all made sense. "I'll kill her."

Jordan smiled. "She's not worth the effort, baby."

Sarah sat up and dried her eyes. "I beg to differ. She used me to stab you in the back. *That bitch.*"

"Family is a powerful motivator. She may not have seen it as a bad thing to do at all. She was just doing a favor for her uncle. If, in fact, we have the right of it."

Sarah was as angry as she had ever felt. If Lisa had been within reach in that moment, she would not have been able to stop herself from striking out. Sarah had never hit anyone in anger, but she knew now that she was fully capable of doing it. "I'll still kill her."

"I'd rather you didn't. Just let it go, little one. She lost. They both did."

"Did they? The dungeon is closed. You got kicked off the board for the shelter. It doesn't have to get printed in the paper to hurt you. Am I supposed to just step back and let them get away with it? Shouldn't there be consequences for what they've done?"

"Maybe, but I don't want to be the one to carry out the punishment, and I don't want you to be the one either. We're better than that. It's okay to be angry about it, but let it stop there. Revenge will only bring unpleasant consequences down on *our* heads. Let karma handle it."

Sarah concentrated on relaxing. She was no less angry, but there was nothing she could do about

it right then.

"Is this a hand print?"

Oops. Sarah had forgotten about that. It wasn't terribly visible, but she had known that Jordan was likely to see it. Jordan noticed everything. "Don't get mad."

Jordan's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Someone hit you?"

Sarah put her hands on Jordan's shoulders and prayed that Jordan didn't end up in prison. "It's okay, Jordan. I handled it. It doesn't hurt."

"I. Want. To. Know. Who. Hit. You."

Sarah licked dry lips and considered lying. She could feel Jordan's hands shaking in rage and decided that she didn't want that anger aimed at her. "It was Lisa."

Jordan's eyes closed and the sound of her teeth grinding was clear.

"She was being nasty and I was giving her a hard time. I was really pushing her buttons. Tamar and Janet stood up for me right away and got between us. It didn't hurt. Please, Jordan, don't do anything. I'm begging you."

Blue eyes opened and they glittered sharply. "No one hits you. No one."

Nervous at the rage being expressed on her behalf, Sarah slowly moved to embrace her lover. "I don't think I could handle it if you got arrested, Jordan. Let it go. I'm all right. I'll never let her that close again. It won't happen again."

Jordan's embrace was hard, yet still tender. A single sob escaped as Jordan buried her face in Sarah's neck. "No one hits you, baby. Never again."

"Never again," Sarah agreed. She held on tightly as Jordan began to rock them both. "I'm okay, love. I swear."

Jordan pulled back, tears on her cheeks, her hands framing Sarah's face gently. "You are so precious to me. You don't even know how necessary you are...how much I need you. I love you so much. It kills me that someone hit you. I can't have it, little one. I can't. Everything that hurts you is a knife to my heart. It twists me up inside something fierce. I love you. I love you. Everything I feel, everything I am, it's all for you. I love you."

Sarah's tears were back. She moved her hands to Jordan's face, tracing the lines and angles that defined everything that was beautiful and good in her world.

"After school," Jordan choked out, "wherever you go, whatever you choose to do, please, let me be part of it. Part of you. I'll go anywhere you want. Live anywhere you say. I'll do anything,

Sarah. Please, don't leave me. Let me come with you."

Seeing Jordan so vulnerable in her need shifted something deep within Sarah. She smiled as she leaned in to softly kiss the full lips. "I want to stay here," she whispered. "With you."

Jordan gasped, fresh tears falling. "Are you sure?"

Sarah nodded, her arms winding around Jordan's neck. "But there's something I have to tell you first."

Jordan nodded, her eyes anxiously waiting.

After so many times of wanting to say it, the words came easily. "I love you."

Jordan melted into Sarah. She cried freely and Sarah held her tight. "I've always loved you, sweetheart. Always. I'm sorry it took so long for me to be able to say it. I love you."

"I knew," Jordan sobbed. "I knew."

"But you needed to hear it."

Jordan nodded, her sobs relaxing into sniffles.

Sarah felt more relaxed and at peace than she had ever felt before. She finally felt like a grown-up. She felt like she had just done something exactly right. "I love you."

Jordan chuckled softly. "I love you, too."

Sarah laughed with her. "I hope you don't get tired of hearing it. Now that I can say it, it's all I want to say."

Jordan looked up, a big smile splitting her face. "I'll never get tired of hearing it."

"Good. I love you."

"This was so worth waiting for, little one. Every minute of it was worth it. I just want you to know that."

Sarah leaned in to kiss the tears from Jordan's face. Chasing the salty tracks led her to her lover's mouth and the first taste led to a deeper joining. It was a perfect kiss: slow, warm, full and giving. Sarah could have lived in that kiss for the rest of her life and been completely happy.

A throat cleared behind them and they slowly separated to look. Maggie stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

"Should I keep dinner on the table or make you plates for later?"

Sarah blushed at being caught.

"She loves me," Jordan proudly announced.

"No shit, Sherlock."

Sarah giggled helplessly.

Jordan sighed. "You do understand the concept of employer and employee, right?"

"Understand this." Maggie showed her middle finger to Jordan. "Dinner's ready."

Jordan's mouth was hanging open as Maggie marched out of the room. "Did she just flip me off?"

Sarah was laughing so hard she could hardly breathe.

"She flipped me off. I can't believe it."

Sarah snorted and knew she had about ten seconds to get to a bathroom before she wet herself. She rolled off Jordan's lap and ran. Or tried to. She couldn't separate her knees. They were the only thing keeping her from wetting her pants.

She almost didn't make it to the bathroom. Letting her bladder go, she put her head down and let herself laugh. "Oh god. Oh god."

Jordan stepped into the half bath and sat on the edge of the sink. "I wish I had a picture of that."

Her ribs were starting to hurt. Sarah locked her hands over her head and tried to calm herself down. "Don't make me laugh."

Jordan chuckled and turned on the water in the sink. "What a day, huh?"

Sarah closed her eyes tightly and concentrated on breathing. If she just didn't *think* she might be okay. Every few seconds a laugh escaped, but she could feel it coming under control. After several minutes, she felt a little more stable. Sitting back, she took a deep breath. "Oh god. I don't think I've ever laughed that hard."

Jordan was washing her face. "You were adorable."

Sarah grinned. "I wish I had a picture of your face."

"Likewise," Jordan grinned back.

Sarah washed her hands and face with Jordan attached to her back like a limpet. "Are you

hungry?"

"Yep."

Sarah dried her hands and smiled at the reflection of her lover in the mirror. "You are so beautiful."

"The eyes of my beholder are kind."

"I want pictures of us together. Like portraits."

"All right."

"With you in your tux."

Jordan waggled her eyebrows. "And you naked?"

Sarah lifted her chin and considered it. "Possibly."

Jordan got that shocked look again. "Really?"

"We can talk about it. After dinner."

"Come on then."

Sarah followed happily.

~***~

They lay together in Sarah's bed, just enough moonlight coming through the windows so that they could see each other. Sarah had assumed they would make love, but they had just talked about their relationship. Explaining how they felt and what they'd been thinking every step of the way. It was making Sarah feel so close to Jordan. In its own way, it was even more intimate than making love.

Jordan's hand was in the small of Sarah's back, whisper soft caresses making her feel boneless and serene. "You know what I've been wondering about?"

"What's that?"

"Remember at the Halloween party when we danced? And you took your gloves off?"

"You noticed that, eh?"

"Yeah. It struck me as kind of...odd. I mean, you didn't take them off with anyone else."

"I wanted to touch you."

"Oh."

"I felt guilty about that for weeks."

"Why?"

Jordan lazily shrugged one shoulder. "Well, I didn't have your permission."

"You did ask me to dance. I said yes, so that's kind of giving you permission."

"It's not that simple. I don't know if you noticed, but I always wore gloves in the dungeon."

"That was my next question," Sarah teased.

"Part of it was just the personae I wanted to project, but it was also because it created a barrier between me and the players. I had to touch them sometimes and it was a way of making it less personal. I took them off to dance with you because I wanted to get personal with you. I did not have your permission to do that."

It made sense. It seemed like beating a distinction to death, but it made sense. "You don't still feel guilty about that, do you?"

"No. I finally decided to cut myself a break. I didn't really do anything inappropriate. At least, I don't think I did."

"I never felt like you did."

"Good."

"Although, I started having these pesky dreams right after that. We danced every night for months in my dreams. It was kind of confusing at the time, but it was very nice."

"I remember you mentioning the dreams. It gave me hope."

"I'm glad."

"Me, too."

"By the way, now that the dungeon is closed, I'm out of a job. Should I quit or do you want to fire me?"

"Quitting looks better on your resume," Jordan said softly.

"True." Sarah was rubbing Jordan's back. There was a bump on one shoulder blade that she kept

coming back to. "What is this?"

"What?"

"You've got something on your back." Sarah maneuvered herself under Jordan's arm and leaned over her long back. "This."

"Probably a zit."

"It's too hard." Sarah reached over to turn on a light, blinking at the brightness before concentrating on what she'd found. "I think it's a blackhead."

"Pick it out."

Sarah scratched at it with her fingernail. "It's in there pretty good. I don't want to hurt you."

Jordan stretched out on the bed with a satisfied sigh. "You won't hurt me."

Sarah went to work. "There is one thing I'm not sure how we should handle."

"What's that, baby?"

"Money. You have so much. There's no way I can pay my fair share. It bothers me."

"Why?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "What if our situations were reversed? Could you be at ease with me paying for everything?"

Jordan was quiet for a moment. "Okay, I see your point."

"How should we handle it? I want to feel like I'm contributing, but I've seen your expenses for this place. There's no way I could even afford to pay the power bill. Anything I could contribute wouldn't even be a drop in the bucket."

Jordan hummed thoughtfully. "You know, I used to know this couple. Their incomes were pretty even, but they did things differently. He paid for living expenses. She paid for entertainment. Maybe something like that could work for us."

"You pay the rent and I take us to the movies? Doesn't sound very equitable."

"Once you start working, you'll be able to afford a lot more than movies, babe. Besides, I like paying the bills. Makes me feel more dominant."

Sarah thought about it. "So I would pay for taking us out to dinner. Maybe vacations?"

"Yeah. Think about it."

It didn't sound like a bad idea. It wasn't equal, but equal was completely out of reach. They would have to find a way around equal to something that felt fair. "If we did that, would you feel like I was doing my share?"

"I already feel that way, little one. But, yes. I think it would work out just fine. It wouldn't just be movies and dinner, you know. It could be anything. If we decided to take up bike riding, you'd have to buy the bikes and helmets. If we went bird-watching, it would be binoculars. Maybe you could cover any hobbies we take up."

"Oh, I see. That makes more sense. We could take up all kinds of things."

"I think it would be fun."

Jordan's blackhead was being stubborn. "This doesn't want to come out."

"Dig harder. You aren't hurting me. In fact, it feels good. Now that you're working on it, I realize that it's been itching a lot. Don't stop until you get it."

Sarah applied herself to the problem with a vengeance. After several minutes it came out. "Yuk. It's huge. And it left a hole."

Jordan laughed. "It must be love."

"What?"

"You're digging blackheads out of my back. Not everyone would do that. It must be love."

Sarah saw the humor in it and leaned down to kiss Jordan's shoulder. "It is."

"Lucky me."

Now that she was looking, she found more. None of them were as big, but there was no sense in letting them grow. "Hold still, love. There's more."

"Have at 'em, baby."

~***~

It was peaceful inside Sarah's mind. It was one of the things she liked best about doing yoga in the morning. There were a lot of benefits in doing it, but the way it made her feel was the best. It was even better than coffee for waking her up and getting her head in the game. Not that she had any intention of giving up her morning coffee.

A rustle in the bed above her made her look up. Jordan's sleepy face smiled down at her. "Good

morning," Sarah smiled.

"Morning," Jordan yawned.

"I haven't even started coffee yet."

"Don't want coffee." Jordan rubbed at an eye like a little kid. "We used to call those Chinese splits."

"That's what I call it, too."

"How long can you do that?"

"I don't know."

"Does it hurt?"

"It used to, but not now. I'm very comfortable."

Jordan looked over her shoulder and made a noise in her chest. "Do you think I could tie you like that? On your back?"

Passion tickled Sarah in a variety of places. "I should think so."

Jordan's grin was wicked and she rolled out of bed. "When you're done, go ahead and take a shower. I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

Jordan was pulling on clothes very quickly. "I need rope."

Sarah had to laugh at Jordan's enthusiasm. The front door slammed and Sarah knew that she would not be able to finish her morning routine. She was too excited. Pushing herself off the floor, she went in to take a shower.

Knowing that they were going to make love, and that Jordan was going to tie her up, made her entire body much more sensitive. The feel of hot water stinging her skin made her gasp with pleasure. Her nipples and clit were already aching with need. It was tempting to give herself an orgasm. She knew that she would be ready for more after only a few minutes of Jordan's touch, but she decided to wait. Letting the feelings build until they were almost unbearable was one of her favorite things.

Jordan still wasn't back when she was done in the shower. Sarah dried herself off, brushed her teeth and picked up the hair dryer. Better to take care of it now than try fixing her hair in time to leave for school. It would look terrible if she allowed it to dry during love-making.

Sarah smiled. Jordan called it 'oh god hair' when the back was all frizzed up from rubbing on the pillow during sex. Sarah hadn't understood what Jordan meant the first time she said it. She still had to chuckle when she remembered Jordan putting her head back to demonstrate, shaking it side to side, her husky voice saying, "oh god, oh god".

The bathroom door opened and Jordan stepped in. Her eyes drank in Sarah's nude body as her clothes dropped away. "I'm going to rinse off. Don't go anywhere."

Sarah turned the hair dryer on Jordan with a grin, pleased at the shudder of arousal it caused. "If I run, will you chase me?"

Jordan smirked. "You won't run."

"We'll see."

Jordan was only in the shower for a minute or two. She dried off quickly and reached for her toothbrush. "Are you ready?"

Sarah's skin began to tingle. "Yes."

"Go sit on the end of the bed. I'll be right there."

Thrumming with anticipation, Sarah went into the bedroom. The top sheet and blankets had been pulled completely off the bed and were piled at the foot. It hadn't been that way when she'd gone into the shower, so she knew that Jordan had done it. Sitting down, she whispered, "Hurry."

There was a small duffel bag sitting on Sarah's dresser. Jordan went there first. She pulled out a number of leather and sheepskin cuffs. Sarah was glad to see them. Ropes would leave marks. The cuffs were very comfortable and left behind no traces. It would be far too warm later to have to wear long sleeves.

Jordan cuffed Sarah's ankles first and then reached for an arm. As she fastened the cuff on the delicate wrist, she asked, "Do you trust me?"

Sarah studied Jordan's face. She seemed tentative. Sarah took that to mean that Jordan wanted to do something different, but she wasn't sure how Sarah would feel about it. Sarah considered it. She knew beyond doubt that Jordan wouldn't hurt her. Knowing that gave her confidence. "I trust you. Do whatever you want, love."

The tall woman closed her eyes and pressed a long kiss into Sarah's palm. "Thank you."

When Sarah's other wrist was cuffed, Jordan leaned down to kiss her; at the same time, pushing her back on the bed. Sarah ran her fingers through Jordan's hair as their lips and tongues said good morning. She knew that she would soon be unable to touch her lover, so she took advantage of the ability while she could.

"Spread your legs for me, little one."

Sarah knew what was expected of her. She spread her legs straight out to the sides. They were not flat on the bed. There really weren't muscles that would do that for her. Pressure would have to be applied.

Jordan eased over to one side and gently pushed Sarah's ankle down beside the bed post. Picking up a short length of rope, she passed it through the ring on the cuff and secured it around the oak post. Trailing her hand along Sarah's leg and over her groin, she reached the other ankle. "Tell me if this hurts or if it's not going to work."

"Go ahead, I'm fine."

Jordan slowly applied downward pressure until the cuff was beside the bedpost. Tying it off, she looked into Sarah's eyes. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I might need you to pull my hips towards you just a bit."

Large hands grasped Sarah around the waist and pulled. "Better?"

"Much," Sarah moaned. "I'm so close. I feel like I might come."

"Me, too, baby."

Jordan took a longer stretch of rope from the duffel bag and went to the side of the bed. She tied one end of it to the cuff on Sarah's wrist. Tossing the rest of the rope under the bed, she went around to the other side and brought the rope up to secure Sarah's other arm. Returning to the foot of the bed, she looked Sarah over.

"You have no idea how sexy you look."

"Touch me?"

Hands fisted at her sides, Jordan dropped her head back with a groan and shuddered. It looked like she was having an orgasm. After several moments, she let out a shaky breath and calmed. Without a word, she began to move around the room. She dropped something on the bed that Sarah couldn't see and went into the bathroom. Jordan came out with a hand towel and shaving cream.

Sarah watched with some trepidation as Jordan sprayed some gel on her fingers and carefully applied it to Sarah's pubic hair. It was cold. Sarah had never shaved there before. She was perfectly willing to allow it, but she felt a bit surprised and uncertain that the time was now. Still, if Jordan wanted to do it, Sarah was going to let her.

Kneeling on the blankets, Jordan picked up what looked like a knife. Pulling the blade out, she revealed a straight razor. Placing one hand on Sarah's thigh, she held up the blade so Sarah could

get a good look at it. "This is extremely dangerous. You must not move. Do you understand?"

Swallowing nervously, Sarah nodded.

"Do you still trust me?"

Sarah discovered that it was possible to feel completely safe and absolutely terrified at the same time. "Yes."

"Take a deep breath and relax, baby."

Sarah drew in a deep breath and let it out. She closed her eyes and concentrated on relaxing her body and mind.

Jordan began.

She had expected it to feel like the hair was being scraped off, but it didn't. She had expected it to be a slow and careful process, but it wasn't. The smooth, cold kisses of the blade were quick and decisive. It was very erotic. Especially the way her outer lips were pulled and stretched this way and that to accommodate the blade. Jordan's knuckles danced over her excited clitoris in the course of it and she had to restrain herself from trying to intensify the touches by moving.

Far sooner than expected, Jordan seemed to be done. Long fingers slid through the shaving cream residue, checking for stray hairs and stubble. Two brief touches of the blade were given and Jordan smiled. "Good girl."

Sarah lifted her head to see as Jordan collected everything and took it to the bathroom. Being bound prevented her from getting a good look, but she could tell that she was bare. It felt odd. She felt more naked than before.

Water ran briefly in the bathroom and Jordan came out with a wet washcloth. Kneeling before the bed again, she lay the hot towel over Sarah's groin. It felt really good and Sarah moaned involuntarily.

"How are your legs holding up?"

"Really good," Sarah answered in a whisper. She put her head back and closed her eyes as Jordan thoroughly cleaned her. She gasped as warm breath blew on her sex.

"I want you to tell me if this hurts or is uncomfortable."

Sarah nodded. And then she felt a kiss between her legs. Her eyes shot open. A hot tongue licked the newly shorn skin. Reflex made her want to say 'stop', but it felt unexpectedly good. She felt one of her outer lips sucked into Jordan's mouth and she shuddered at the sensation.

"Did that hurt?"

"No."

"Do you want me to stop?"

Sarah felt herself getting wetter and her clitoris jumped. "God, no."

Having her legs bound the way they were made it impossible to move. Sarah could not have escaped Jordan's mouth even if she wanted to. She lost track of time as Jordan licked, sucked and nibbled at her. It had never felt like this. It felt like her sex was swollen to twice its normal size and each moment it became more sensitive.

"I didn't know," she moaned. "I never...oh god, Jordan...don't stop. Please don't stop."

A soft tongue slipped between her lips in a long, slow lick. Sarah cried out in delight. "Oh god...more..."

It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. It was warm and intimate. It was more intense than anything they had ever done. The past melted away and there was just *now*. Sarah felt like a piece of chocolate melting in the passion of Jordan's mouth. She was dissolving from the inside out. Jordan was swallowing her whole. Her sense of self was collapsing in on itself and Sarah became nothing more than sensation.

She was aware when long fingers entered her, but it was not a feeling separate from all the others. The pressure inside her heart and belly grew impossibly large and she gasped for air.

A gentle suck and a flick of tongue on her clit threw her into an eternity of ecstasy. Sarah forgot herself for a time in the bliss of it. She was only marginally aware of her bonds being released and being gathered in Jordan's loving embrace.

Sarah moved to tears in the space of a heartbeat. She cried for a long time within her lover's arms, their bodies rocking on the bed. Jordan hummed a little song over and over. Sarah felt empty and cleansed and so tired.

The smell of coffee woke her only moments later. Sarah took a deep breath and blinked her eyes open. Jordan sat next to her, fully dressed, a beautiful smile on her face. "Hey."

"Hey," Jordan said softly. "I let you sleep as long as I could."

Sarah frowned. "School."

"I know, baby. I've got your clothes ready and had Cirenio bring the car over. I'll even drive you, so you don't have to wake up completely for a while yet."

Sarah curled around Jordan's hips. "I don't want to go."

"I know, baby. But if you don't, you'll be angry with yourself later. I'll come with you, okay?"

Sarah knew she was right, but she pouted anyway. She let Jordan dress her with a minimum of fuss and almost laughed when Jordan carried her out to the car. The coffee helped her to feel a bit more awake. Jordan drove efficiently, a hand on Sarah's thigh when it wasn't otherwise engaged.

"Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"Is it like that for you? So intense?"

"Every time."

"I didn't know."

"Now you do."

Sarah put a hand on Jordan's arm as she down-shifted. "You're good at that, you know."

"I'm glad you think so. Thank you for allowing me to do it. It was amazing. You taste so good and you're so responsive. I *hoped* it would be good for you, but I just wasn't sure."

"It was better than good, Jordan. If I had known it would be like that, I would have begged you to do it sooner."

"I have a theory."

"About what?"

"Why it was good for you this time and not before."

"I think it's because you're good at it," Sarah smiled.

Jordan smiled right back. "As much as I would like to take all the credit, I think it's more."

"Let's hear your theory."

"This was the first time you did it with someone you love. Someone you feel safe with. I think love and trust are critical for oral pleasuring."

Sarah considered it thoroughly. "I think you're right, but I think being tied up was a contributing factor, too."

"Why?"

Sarah yawned as she laid her head back. "Remember the first time we made love in the dungeon? You asked me what I loved about being bound and I said I'd have to think about it."

"I remember."

"Well, I've been thinking about it. I'm not sure I fully understand it, but I'm pretty clear about two parts of it that excite me. The first is that it touches on my survival instincts. I *know* I'm safe with you, but being tied up seems to trigger an involuntary primal reaction in me. It's scary to be that vulnerable. But knowing that I'm safe changes that fear into arousal. I don't know how or why, but that seems to be what I feel."

"Okay. What's the second part?"

Sarah stared at her lover while she searched for the words. "I'm not sure how to express it, but it's all about feeling like I don't have a choice. Or maybe control is the word I'm searching for. I'm not sure. When you tie me up, it feels like I'm completely helpless. Like everything that happens is inevitable and there is nothing I can do to stop it. I don't even feel like my body belongs to me. It belongs to you and everything I do and feel is something you take from me. I'm not responsible for any of it."

Jordan glanced over at Sarah. "And you enjoy that?"

"God, yes!"

A smile flickered briefly across Jordan's lips. "You should know that what you're saying isn't something I understand in my gut."

Sarah reached out and put a hand on Jordan's thigh. "That's why I'm trying to explain it to you. Not so much so you will understand, but so you will accept that it's something I need. The way you were this morning...you didn't ask. You just did it. That's part of what I found so exciting about it. There was no coddling or explaining first. You did what you wanted to do. You took all of the responsibility and I was free to experience what you made me feel. I love that."

"I'll have to take your word for it."

"Jordan, if I had my way, I'd be bound by you, one way or another, all the time."

"Really?"

Sarah smiled at the shock on Jordan's face. "Try me."

Jordan glanced at Sarah again, but this time her smile was positively wicked.

"I think I've unleashed a monster," Sarah giggled.

"I have so many ideas right now."

"Good." Sarah took a sip of her coffee and closed her eyes. "I can still feel your mouth on me."

"I can still taste you," Jordan said in a husky whisper.

"I want you to do it again."

"I will, baby. You can count on it."

~***~

Jordan was in the hallway when Sarah's first class ended. She was standing against a wall, her hands buried in her pockets, and Sarah wanted to throw her down on the floor and make love to her. She walked straight up to her lover and stretched up on her toes to kiss her. "Hey. How long have you been waiting?"

"All my life," Jordan said with dreamy eyes.

Touched by the sentiment, Sarah laid her head under Jordan's chin. "Me, too."

Jordan's arms circled Sarah for a warm embrace. "Don't you have about an hour free right now?"

"Yes."

"You need something more than coffee. I'll buy you breakfast. Where's the nearest place to get something to eat?"

Securing her backpack over one shoulder, Sarah took Jordan's hand and led her to the café in the Student Union. Most of what they served was pastries and bagels, but Sarah didn't have a lot of time. She ordered a carton of orange juice and a toasted bagel topped with cream cheese and walnuts. Jordan chose a brownie, two chocolate chip cookies and a large coffee.

They took their food to a table by the windows and sat down. They couldn't seem to stop smiling at each other. It felt to Sarah that she was falling in love with Jordan all over again. "I can't believe you waited outside my class."

"I hope you don't mind. I just didn't want to be away from you today."

"I didn't want to be away from you either. God, I love you."

Jordan beamed. "Eat. I don't want to be worrying about you."

Sarah dug into her food. She had a mouthful when Jordan began to speak.

"Have you thought anymore about the money situation? You know, I pay for bills and you pay

for fun?"

Sarah struggled to swallow and ended up talking around her food. "Haven't had much time to."

"True. But is it something you think you might be willing to try? Maybe on a trial basis? Say...six months?"

It sounded perfectly reasonable. If it wasn't working they could always talk it out and come up with something else. She nodded.

"Good. I want to get you a cell phone."

Sarah raised her eyebrows.

"If I'm paying for the bills," Jordan went on, "one of them is going to be the phone bill. Seems like I should be able to pay for whatever type of phone service I want. I can get you a cell phone and add you to my plan for almost nothing. Are you going to argue with me about it?"

Sarah almost choked as she started to laugh. Jordan was asking and not asking all in the same sentence. It was too funny to start a fight over it and Jordan was right. If she was paying for phone service, she should be able to pay for what she wanted. If she wanted Sarah to have a cell phone, then Sarah would accept it. "I don't feel like arguing today."

"Good. I'll go out and pick one up while you're in your next class."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Sarah watched Jordan take a big bite of her cookie. "I want to trade the Jaguar for a Toyota Prius."

Jordan's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Gas mileage mostly. The Jag is a great car, but at best, it gets yardage. Also, it's not very practical for every day driving. There isn't much room in it. Don't get me wrong, I love that car, but I think a Prius is more my style. If you like, you can buy it back for the thousand I paid you. I've got enough money to buy myself a car without using the Jag as a trade-in."

Jordan took a drink of her coffee as she thought about it. "No, I think you should use it as a trade. It's your car. I've been wanting to look into the Prius myself. It might be a good choice for Maggie. Her Taurus is getting old. Do you mind if I come with you?"

Sarah's relief was great. "I was hoping you'd come. You've got a lot more experience at buying cars than I do. I was worried about getting taken."

"We can go after school."

"Thanks."

~***~

As it turned out, the Jaguar was worth considerably more than Sarah had realized. Cirenio's detailed records of maintenance on the Jaguar and its low mileage meant that it was worth more than blue book. Sarah was able to get a fully loaded Prius. It had leather seats, satellite radio, emergency and first aid kits, cargo net, air bags and all weather floor mats. It was a blue pearl in color and Sarah loved it.

She also received a check for \$9,000 to cover the difference in values. She knew that she would not have received such a large amount had Jordan not been there. The salesman kept calling Sarah 'little lady' and only began to negotiate in earnest when Jordan took over. Sarah tried to give the check to Jordan, but Jordan refused it. Sarah decided she would open a checking account with it to start their entertainment fund.

Jordan was impressed with the car. It offended her sense of style, but the economy of it was overwhelming. She promised that she would have Maggie there as soon as it was practical to have a look at one.

Sarah was signing papers to relinquish the Jaguar and take possession of the new Prius when she felt a prickly feeling crawl up her spine. She tried to shrug it off, but it persisted. There was no reason for it. Jordan was out on the showroom floor and Sarah turned to look for her. She saw the tall woman with a newspaper in hand, her body stiff and her color pale.

"Is something wrong?" the salesman asked.

"I don't know," Sarah replied absently. Setting the pen aside, she went out to Jordan and put a hand on her back. "What is it?"

"The bastard did it," Jordan said in a quiet, yet harsh tone. "He outted me."

"I thought his editor wouldn't let him without good reason."

"He tied it in with the shelter kicking me off the board."

Sarah took the paper and read the article. She was not surprised that Westman slanted the entire story in favor of the shelter's board of directors. He made it sound like everything Jordan had done for battered women in their community was suspect because of her hidden gender. It was disgusting and there was nothing she could do to make it better for Jordan.

"I'm sorry, love."

Jordan's shoulders were slumped. "I knew he'd find a way. At least he left you out of it."

"I almost wish he hadn't."

"Don't wish that, baby. You've got enough on your shoulders right now. I knew this was coming. I'll handle it."

Sarah could see that Jordan was putting up a brave front, but she knew that her lover was hurting. "We'll handle it, love. You're not alone in this. No matter what the newspaper prints, I know the truth. You are all that is good and honorable. This," she shook the paper roughly, "is trash. I know it and you know it. So does everyone who knows you."

Jordan smiled weakly. "Thanks, babe. Go ahead and finish up with your car. You can drive us home."

Home sounded like a good idea. There was nothing Sarah could do for Jordan in the middle of a car dealership.

[Continued...](#)

[BadSquirrel's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions

or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Part Seven

"I miss Maggie."

"So do I."

It had been a beautiful day. Not too hot and just the slightest breeze. The two of them were watching the sunset from Sarah's front steps as they drank lemonade. Sarah was feeling a little out of sorts since Maggie left for her cruise. "It's not even that I want or need something from her right now. It's just this nagging feeling that something is missing."

"I know, babe. I feel that way every year when she goes."

"So, it's not just me?"

"Nope."

Sarah set her glass between her feet and rested her elbows on her knees. "I can't even think of anything I want to do to take my mind off of it. I'm feeling all grumpy."

"I don't know what I want either, but I'm willing to bite someone to get it."

Sarah leaned away from her lover. "Where's Pete when you need him?"

Jordan chuckled. "Yeah, pounding on him might make me feel better."

"Maybe we could go to the batting cages. Knock some balls around."

"Maybe."

Sarah studied her lover. Something wasn't quite right with her. Things had been tense after the article in the paper, but Jordan claimed she was over that. She'd been better for a while, but now things were getting worse again. "Jordan?"

"Hmm?"

"What's going on? You've been kind of down for a while now. I'd really like to help if I can. Even if it's just by listening."

Jordan sighed, her eyes downcast.

"Is it me?"

"No, baby, it's not you."

"Then what is it? What's wrong?"

Jordan seemed to deflate. "Is it that noticeable?"

"Only because I love you."

"It's not just one thing. I just need some time to work it all out, but it's not you. Believe me. You're the one good thing in my life right now. Just be patient with me, okay?"

Sarah couldn't help but feel disappointed. She wanted Jordan to confide in her about her problems, but Jordan wouldn't, or couldn't, do it. "As long as it takes," she said lovingly. "I'll be here for you."

Jordan leaned over to kiss Sarah's cheek. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

Several minutes passed in silence as the sun set. There were no clouds to make the sky more vivid, but it was pretty nonetheless.

"Finals," Jordan said abruptly.

"What about them?"

"They're not this week, right?"

"The following week," Sarah clarified.

Jordan nodded. "I was thinking that maybe you should skip the parties until they're over. Not much happens anyway and it might be less stressful for you if you have plenty of time to study."

It made sense. The last few parties Sarah had attended were quiet affairs. Folks dropped by for an hour or so to visit and then left. She wouldn't be missing anything. "If you think it's best."

"Yeah. I'll just come back here after they've gone."

"Okay."

The feeling that something was wrong got stronger. Sarah didn't know what to do. Until Jordan

was ready to talk about it, all Sarah could do was be there for her lover. Scooting closer, she put an arm around Jordan's waist and laid her head on Jordan's shoulder. Love would have to be enough.

~***~

For the first few seconds, Sarah thought a bird had somehow flown inside her t-shirt and was trying to get out. She leapt to her feet and had her shirt halfway off before she realized it was her cell phone vibrating. Sarah fumbled the phone out of her shirt pocket, her face catching fire as people figured out what had happened and started laughing.

Pushing a button at random, she lifted the slim device to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, baby."

"Oh God," Sarah groaned. "You have no idea how bad I just embarrassed myself. Half the airport is laughing at me."

"I can hear them. What happened?"

Sarah stepped away from the common seating and leaned up against a support pillar so she could have a little privacy. "I thought a bird flew up my shirt."

"A bird?"

"I had the phone set on vibrate so it wouldn't bother anyone if it rang."

Jordan started to laugh.

"It's not funny."

Jordan disagreed by laughing even harder.

"I almost had my shirt off before I realized what it was," Sarah complained.

"Oh God," Jordan howled. "I can picture it. Pete's going to love it."

"You can't tell Pete," Sarah protested.

"Why not?"

Sarah grinned. "Because if you do, I'll tell him about our little adventure in Macy's the other day."

There was total silence on the line.

"Remember?" Sarah asked innocently. "I still can't figure out how you managed to immobilize yourself. It was just a bra. I know you haven't worn one in a while, but they aren't that hard to figure out."

"We agreed we wouldn't talk about that," Jordan said calmly.

"Well, now we're agreeing not to talk about me freaking out when my phone rang."

Jordan sighed. "Fine. Go ahead. Suck all the fun out of my life."

Sarah silently pumped an arm in victory. "I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, alright."

"Was there a reason you called?"

"Beyond just wanting to hear your voice?"

"Beyond that, yes."

"I need you to stop at Premium Liquors on the way home and pick up another couple bottles of Jameson's. I already called the store and paid for them. They just need a ride home."

Sarah rolled her eyes. Stephen Jennings, Jordan's financial wizard, had been at the estate for three days now and he drank like a fish. The bourbon he liked cost over \$400 a bottle and he was going through them like they were spring water. Not to mention that he smoked cigars incessantly. Jordan tried to keep the smoking confined, but the entire house was beginning to reek.

Even worse, when Jordan wasn't looking, Stephen leered at Sarah like he wanted to dip her in barbeque sauce and gnaw on her bones. It was creepy.

She could have sworn that Jordan had told her she would like Stephen. It was a complete mystery why Jordan liked him. From what Sarah could see, there wasn't a single thing worth liking about the man. He was smug, pretentious and greedy. Sarah didn't like him at all and she avoided him as much as possible. When she couldn't, she played like a mouse and tried to be invisible.

"Sure. The only problem is that it will be a while yet. Maggie's first flight was delayed. She made her second, but not the last one. She won't be here for another hour or so."

"Oh. She's going to be tired. Maybe I can get someone else to do it."

"That's alright. I'm sure Stephen can wait and if you already paid, it will only take a second. I don't mind and I'm sure Maggie will be okay with it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep. It's not a problem."

"Thanks, baby. I appreciate it."

All Sarah could think was that the side trip meant that much less time spent in Stephen's noxious presence. "Anything else I can pick up for you?"

"I can't think of anything off the top of my head."

"Okay."

"I love you, baby."

"I love you, too."

Sarah found a place to sit after the call. With nothing better to occupy her time, she played with her phone. Jordan had downloaded a bunch of games into it. Most of them were puzzle and card games, but there were some run-jump-and-shoot games as well. Sarah learned quickly that she wasn't good at those. She found a pirate game and opened it just out of curiosity. Reading the 'help' file, she determined that it was a turn-based financial game. It sounded like something she could handle, so she initiated the game.

Right away it asked her to name her ship and captain. Sarah thought about it for a few minutes. She didn't want to choose anything cliché and being a pirate wasn't something she had ever played at as a child. It came to her suddenly and made her giggle.

Captain Clitoris of the Frigate Vulva was on the prowl. Mwahahahaha.

The hour passed quickly. When the arrivals and departures board showed Maggie's flight as having landed, Sarah put her phone away and went to stand where she could see down the terminal. She was excited about Maggie coming home. She hoped that Maggie's trip had been what she hoped for, but Sarah had missed her terribly. It would be good to have her back.

A lot of people were coming and going. It was impossible to tell if any of them were from Maggie's flight. She was beginning to worry that Maggie had missed another connection, but then she spotted her being driven on a motorized cart. Sarah broke into a smile. It was all she could do to refrain from jumping up and down like a game-show contestant. Maggie was home!

The cart barely came to a stop before Sarah was hugging the life out of Maggie. "God, I missed you!"

"I missed you too, dear. Where's Jordan?"

Sarah made a face. "Home with Stephen."

Maggie frowned. "I thought he would be gone by now."

"He arrived a few days late. Something to do with the fate of the free world, from the way he tells it."

Maggie snorted her displeasure at the news and turned to talk to the skycap. She gave him her claim tickets and some money and he left with a smile to fetch her luggage. Taking Sarah's hand, she found some seats and plopped down into one. "Lord, I'm bushed. They do what they can to make travel comfortable, but it still makes me feel like stale bread."

Sarah sat down beside her friend. "How was the cruise? Did you have a good time?"

"Oh, it was wonderful. If you ever have a chance to sail on a masted ship, do it. It's just the most amazing thing. One minute it was calm and peaceful and the next it was a flurry of activity. Watching those young people climbing the rigging was breathtaking. At times I felt as if I had traveled back in time. It gave me a whole new appreciation for our ancestors. They accomplished astonishing things with what they had."

Sarah was grinning from ear to ear. It was nice to see Maggie enthusiastic about her trip. "You have to tell me everything."

"I'll do better than that. I kept a journal."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. When my memory goes, reading the journal will be like taking the trip all over again. It's full of trinkets and souvenirs. Silly things mostly, but I think you'll enjoy reading it."

"I can't wait."

Maggie folded her hands in her lap and looked seriously at Sarah. "So, how's it going with Stephen?"

Sarah sighed. "I can't stand him, Maggie. For the life of me, I can't see what Jordan likes about him. He brags all the time and nothing is ever enough for him. He's horrible."

"I was hoping to avoid seeing him this year."

"I don't blame you."

Maggie patted Sarah's arm. "He can't help it, dear. Is he still drinking?"

"Like a fish. What do you mean? Why can't he help it?"

"He has a narcissistic personality disorder. It's only begun to manifest the last four years or so."

He was so sweet and gentle before."

Sarah felt like a jerk. Here she was hating the guy and it turned out that he had mental problems. "Why isn't he on medication?"

"It can't be medicated. He needs psychotherapy, but he can't admit that he needs it. Denial is at the root of his condition. It's so sad. Watching him destabilize is heart wrenching."

"Why didn't Jordan tell me?"

"You would have to ask him, dear, but we both know that keeping secrets for others is a fundamental part of his personality."

"True," Sarah admitted.

"Oh," Maggie moaned. "I'll be so glad to get home. I want to take a long bath and sleep until tomorrow."

"Maybe I should go get the car and meet you outside."

"Would you? You're such a sweet girl."

Sarah had forgotten that Maggie wasn't home when she'd traded the Jaguar. She beamed with pride as Maggie oohed and aahed over the car.

"It's so quiet."

"It only uses the gas engine when it needs to. I'm still getting used to how quiet it is. Cirenio is going to keep it next week to put a special battery in the back."

"Why?"

"It's a lithium ion battery that will run the car for fifty miles before needing to be recharged. When it runs out of juice, the car reverts to normal, but with the battery it will only use a half a gallon of gas over that fifty miles. I really like the idea of getting a hundred miles to the gallon."

"Especially with gas prices the way they are."

"Jordan is talking about getting you one, too."

Maggie smiled. "He can be the sweetest boy."

"Even if he's a girl?"

"Even then."

~***~

Maggie's journal was incredible. It was filled with all sorts of trivia about the voyage itself, but the stories of the other passengers made it so much fun. Every funny or sweet thing that Maggie witnessed on the cruise had found a place in the pages. In between stories were little line drawings. Sarah was surprised at how good an artist Maggie was.

There were pictures of passengers, sunsets, birds and islands throughout the pages and they made Sarah feel as if she had actually been there. Also tucked within the pages were little souvenirs: cocktail napkins, a feather, a drink umbrella, several flowers, matchbooks and postcards. It was a treasure chest of memories. She might not know where they were going, but Sarah decided that she would keep a journal just like it when Jordan took her away after school.

Sarah was sitting on the floor beside Maggie's chair in the den. The old woman was sleeping, her mouth hanging open. A big box sat on the other side of Maggie and Sarah desperately wanted to open it. There were presents in it.

Jordan and Stephen were on the other side of the room. Financial statements were spread out over a desk and Jordan was trying to understand them. Stephen might have been able to help, but he was three sheets to the wind and not making much sense at all. Fortunately, he was not smoking one of his noxious cigars.

Maggie had walked into the house earlier, hugged Stephen, and then informed him that it was rude to smoke in a house of non-smokers. She had been very stern. To Sarah's surprise, Stephen had been very gracious about it. The house still smelled, but not as bad. In time the scent of smoke would fade completely.

Now that she knew about Stephen's disorder, Sarah was able to be much more forgiving. She still didn't particularly like him and the way he looked at her was just wrong, but he was easier to tolerate now. Unless he spoke to her directly, Sarah tuned him out.

Sarah was reading about the day and a half Maggie spent in Barbados when Jordan threw her hands up.

"I'm just not getting it, okay? You've explained it a dozen times and it makes less sense now than when you started."

"It's really very simple," Stephen sighed dramatically.

"Enough," Jordan barked as she abruptly stood. "I'm going for a walk to clear my head. We'll try this again when I get back."

Sarah watched Jordan stalk out of the room and glanced at Stephen. He was shaking his head as if he'd been dealing with a particularly stupid child. Sticking her thumb in the journal to save her place, she asked, "What are you trying to explain?"

Stephen sniffed at her. "Now your talents extend outside the bedroom?"

Fighting against the urge to poke him in the eye with a sharp stick, Sarah took a page from Maggie's book. "That was unnecessary. I don't deserve that from you."

Stephen stared at her for a long moment as if he were undecided how to proceed. "Would you be willing to sign a cohabitation agreement?"

Sarah blinked. It was not what she expected him to say. "Yes."

"Good," he said as he began looking through his papers. "I've got one here."

That made her nervous. Sarah was not against signing the agreement. She had been expecting Jordan to bring it up for some time, but it was something she assumed she would do with Jordan. To have Stephen shoving one in her face was not the way she'd seen it happening.

"Ah. Here it is. Come on over and we'll get this done."

Maggie was still asleep. Sarah wished she were awake to help with this. Setting aside the trip journal, Sarah reluctantly approached the desk.

"There's a lot of legalese here, but I'll help you through it."

Sarah sat down and took the three page document. "I'll read through it and ask if I have questions."

"Very well. This is a smart move on your part. It protects you from being taken advantage of."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "As the wealthier party, Jordan will benefit more from this document than I do."

"You could see it that way. Or you could see that losing half of your assets would hurt you far more than Jordan losing half of hers."

"Losing Jordan would hurt me more than losing all of my...assets."

"Hmm...yes, well..."

The agreement seemed pretty standard but for a few sections. If Sarah cheated on Jordan, she forfeited everything. If Jordan cheated on Sarah, she had to pay the equivalent of ten years of Sarah's salary at the time. After ten years, Sarah was automatically due five million dollars upon dissolution of the relationship. Provided the relationship didn't end due to infidelity before that ten years, Sarah could expect to receive fifty thousand dollars for each year they had been together. Anything they bought jointly would be divided appropriately, but the assets they held prior to the signing of the agreement were untouchable.

Sarah finished reading and sat back to think.

"Problem?"

Stephen was sitting beside her with a pen in his hand. The smell of bourbon rolled off of him like a wave and was making her nauseous. "Just considering."

"This is more than fair. You won't get a better deal than this. And really, it's not like you can get married. You don't have a right to expect anything at all. You should feel lucky to be getting this much."

Personality disorder or not, enough was enough. "Screw you, Stephen." She passed Jordan on her way outside.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"What's wrong?"

"Ask your friend."

"Sarah."

Stopping on the back steps, Sarah looked up at her lover. "I don't care what's wrong with him," she said angrily. "He's an asshole. I'll sign whatever you want (though I could have done without having a price tag on our relationship), but I don't want to see him again. I'm sorry, but that's just how it has to be."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The cohabitation agreement," Sarah all but screamed.

Jordan's face got hard. "I'll kill him."

"You do that."

She left Jordan there and stomped home. What Stephen said hurt. The clauses about infidelity hurt. The idea of planning for the loss of their love had hurt the most. Sarah broke into tears as soon as she got inside her house.

She was down to sniffles and the occasional hiccup when Maggie walked in without knocking. The old woman went straight to Sarah and embraced her.

"You poor thing," Maggie crooned.

Sarah broke into fresh sobs. It was embarrassing to cry because she was angry, but she couldn't help it.

"That's it, honey. You just cry it all out. It'll make you feel better and then we can talk while we wait for Jordan."

Wait for Jordan? Curiosity dried up her tears and Sarah sat back to look at Maggie. "Where is Jordan?"

"Packing Stephen's things. She's taking him to the airport."

"She's kicking him out?"

Maggie caressed Sarah's hair. "She's giving him thirty days to get into therapy. If he doesn't do it, she's going to fire him."

"But...I didn't...she can't..."

"Shh. I don't know exactly what was said, honey, but I saw the papers. Jordan is furious. She had nothing to do with drawing them up. She's worried that you think she did."

"I wasn't sure," Sarah admitted. She reached for a tissue and dried her tears. "It's not the papers anyway. I'll sign anything she wants. I don't have a problem with it. It only makes sense for her to have an agreement like that."

"What hurt your feelings then?"

Sarah bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying again. "Basically, that we don't have a real relationship and that I should feel lucky to get anything at all. And I do. Every single day I wake up and I know how lucky I am to have Jordan in my life. You, Pete, Amanda, my friends at school; all of it. Not a moment goes by that I'm not completely aware of how fortunate I am. But, Stephen was making it all about how much money I was going to get if we don't work out. I don't care about that. This is not a business proposition for me."

"That's not what it is for Jordan either, honey. You didn't see how angry she was. I've never seen her like that."

Sarah laid her head on Maggie's lap with a sigh. "I didn't mean to come between them."

"Don't think that, dear. Stephen's condition came between them, not you. This has been a long time coming. I think, in the long run, that this will be good for Stephen. He needed someone he values to stand up to him and point him in the right direction. It should have happened years ago."

Sarah closed her eyes as Maggie played with her hair. "Some homecoming this has been for you. All you wanted was a hot bath and a good night's sleep and you ended up with all this drama."

"It's good to be home," Maggie chuckled.

Sarah tilted her head up to look at Maggie. "I love you."

Maggie smiled gently. "I love you too, honey."

While they waited for Jordan to return, Maggie went home to shower and Sarah retrieved the box of gifts from the big house. Sarah was delighted with her gifts. Maggie got her two sarongs. One of them was a royal blue with a lighter blue pattern of leaves on it. The other was a deep purple with flowers hand-painted on it. Fortunately, Maggie also brought instructions on how to wear one. Sarah stripped down and tried it out. It was the most comfortable thing she'd ever worn.

The other thing Maggie brought her made her laugh with delight. It started with a large ceramic bowl done in blues and greens. Into it, Maggie poured enough white beach sand to fill it. Then she was given a Ziploc bag full of rocks and shells Maggie had collected from different beaches. Maggie called it a Carribean Zen Garden. Sarah was enchanted with it. To be able to touch something from so far away was quite amazing. The sand still held the scent of the ocean. Each rock was unique and the shells were as perfect as they were beautiful.

Sarah got it all arranged just so and Maggie put a colorful drink umbrella in it to finish it off. "This is the best gift ever," Sarah said truthfully. "I love it."

Jordan arrived a short time later. She still looked angry. Sarah swallowed nervously and stood up. "I'm sorry, Jordan. I just couldn't..."

"Don't. It wasn't your fault, but we do need to talk."

Maggie made as if to go, but Jordan stopped her. Holding a hand out for Sarah, Jordan waited until she took it and led her into the kitchen. Sarah's belly was full of butterflies.

Jordan took papers from a pocket and opened them. "This is the agreement Stephen wanted you to sign. I knew nothing about it and would not have approved of this if I had."

"I know."

"You believe me?"

"Of course I do. I'm sorry that I snapped at you like I did."

"No forgiveness is necessary." Jordan dangled the paper in Sarah's view. "Do you think we need an agreement like this?"

Sarah considered her words carefully. She didn't know what Jordan wanted to hear, but she had to be honest. "I think it's smart for you to have one, but I hope we don't ever need one. If we do...split up...I don't want anything. There's not enough money in the world to make up for losing

you."

Jordan looked like she was going to cry. She struggled with her emotions for a few seconds and then took a deep breath. "We're not going to need one because we're never going to split up. Not ever."

Sarah fought her own emotions. She'd done enough crying for one day. "That might be long enough."

Jordan looked confused. "Long enough for what?"

"For loving you."

The cohabitation agreement was forgotten as Jordan held Sarah close. "I'm sorry about Stephen. I should have warned you, but I was hoping he was better. I didn't know he was going to hurt you. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Sarah said into a strong shoulder. "Even when it's bad, you're the best thing I've ever felt."

Several minutes passed in silence, their bodies rocking back and forth. After the stress of the last few days, they needed this connection.

"Sarah?"

"Hmm?"

"What is this you're wearing?"

Sarah pulled back and looked down at herself. "It's a sarong. Maggie brought me two of them. Do you like it?"

Jordan nodded her head slowly. "It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

Sarah grinned with pleasure.

"I'm buying you more of them."

"I'd like that. It's really comfortable."

Jordan glanced toward the living room and lowered her voice to a whisper. "After Maggie leaves, I'm going to peel this off you with my teeth."

Sarah shivered with anticipation. "I can't wait."

~***~

Finals week was intense. Sarah spent every moment reading and re-reading her course books. She felt confident that she would do well on her tests, but school was almost over. Sarah couldn't help feeling like this was her last chance to absorb what her professors had been trying to teach her. She wanted everything they could give her.

Jordan and Maggie were very helpful. Between them, Sarah's needs were taken care of. Maggie cooked for her and kept her cottage cleaned. Jordan took to quizzing her when Sarah was bathing, eating and dressing. The two of them kept distractions to a minimum and Sarah took full advantage of the extra study time. Having the support was invaluable.

And then it was over. Sarah stepped out of her last final late on Friday afternoon with a sigh of relief and trepidation. School was over. She had achieved what she set out to do. She had graduated from college. Of course, graduation wasn't for a week, but that was just a formality.

"Hey."

Sarah turned to Tamar with a smile. "Hey."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It just hit me that I'm done. It's over."

"For you," Tamar teased. "I'm on to law school now."

Sarah looped her hand through Tamar's arm with a laugh. "Do you know where yet?"

"Little Rock, Arkansas."

"Interesting choice."

"It's a good school. I won a scholarship and I can live with cousins."

"That's great, Tee. I'm happy for you."

"I'm pretty excited. What about you? Have you found a job yet?"

"Not yet," Sarah admitted. "Of course, it might help if I was actually looking. I've got the vacation with Jordan after graduation and I'm reluctant to look seriously until after that. I'd hate to have to cancel this trip because of a job. Jordan would be so disappointed."

"Do you know where you're going yet?"

"Well, I've gotten her to admit that it's not Antarctica or the moon. Beyond that, I have no idea."

"It's so romantic. Being swept away to an unknown location with the hottest guy/girl on the

planet. You're so lucky."

"I know," Sarah grinned smugly.

"Hey, did you hear about Lisa?"

"I haven't heard anything about anyone for over a week. Why? What happened?"

"She got caught cheating."

Sarah was shocked. "Are you serious?"

"She was buying term papers. Previously used term papers. They kicked her out of school."

Part of Sarah wanted to celebrate, but her over-riding feeling was pity. Lisa was no genius, but she wasn't a slouch either. She could have graduated on her own merits and gone on to do whatever her abilities would allow. Instead, she threw her potential credentials away on a shortcut.

"I didn't know," Sarah said. "I thought she was smarter than that."

"Apparently not. I thought you'd be happier."

"I thought I would be, too, but it's just such a waste. She was this close to graduating and now it's gone. She might be able to get into another school to finish up, but it's going to be harder. Maybe I should be glad after the crap she pulled, but I just feel sorry for her."

"You are one weird chick," Tamar teased.

"What does it say about you that you're my friend?"

"Bite me."

"Don't tempt me."

Tamar rolled her eyes dramatically. "You're such a perv."

"But you like that about me."

"There is that," Tamar sighed. "The three of us should get together this week. One last blow out before we leave the nest."

"I'd like that."

"Good. I'll talk to Janet and give you a call."

~***~

Sarah opened the door to her house and a smile bloomed on her face. Jordan was stretched out on the easy chair, her feet crossed on the ottoman and her hands behind her head. She was buck naked except for a strap-on sporting a day-glo purple dildo and a smirk.

"Well, well. Looks like it's my lucky day."

Sarah put on her best serious face. "Who are you and what are you doing in my house?"

"Jest restin' mah feet, little lady," Jordan drawled in a disturbingly bad cowboy accent. "Ah'm right tuckered out."

"You'd best be moving on before the neighbors come to see why I'm screaming, mister."

"Nah. All the neighbors be out. E'en that nosy old woman nex' door. We be all alone. Ya kin scream all ya want."

Sarah was having a hard time not laughing, but she liked where it was going. She began to take off her clothes, leaving them in a pile behind the door. "You wouldn't force me, would you?"

"Cain't hardly call it forcin' if'n yer on top, now kin ya?"

Sarah kicked off her shoes and let her jeans fall. "I have to tell you that I'm a lesbian."

"I kin do that," Jordan said as she flicked her tongue out.

Sarah bit her lip to keep from giggling. "I have a girlfriend. She would not approve."

"Well now, what she don't know won't hurt 'er none." Jordan patted her lap. "Why don't ya come on o'er and have yerself a seat. I'll show ya what a real man kin do."

Naked, Sarah straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "I don't think so."

"No sense in fightin' it, darlin'. Ya know ya want it." Jordan grabbed a hold of the dildo with one hand. "It's right purty, ain't it?"

"You aren't getting near me with that thing."

Jordan grinned. "Ya kin run, but ya cain't hide."

A crazy idea sprouted and Sarah decided not to censor it. "Wanna bet?"

Two seconds later she was running across the lawn, giggling.

"Come back here, you wench!"

Jordan's shout spurred Sarah on. The giggles grew into laughter as she ran towards the big house.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to run in one of these things?"

Laughing too hard to run, Sarah stopped and clutched her middle, trying to catch her breath. Turning, she saw Jordan standing on her porch, hands on her hips, the dildo standing out like a flag pole.

Sarah took a deep breath and shook her tits at her lover. "You wanna piece of this? Bring it on, big man!"

"Oh, that does it!"

Jordan leapt from the porch and started to run. The dildo was flapping side to side and Sarah laughed so hard she snorted. It was the funniest thing she had ever seen. In the next instant, she realized that Jordan was moving really fast. A tendril of panic gave her legs a shot of adrenalin and she was running again.

In a straight out run, she knew that Jordan would catch her quickly. She needed something to slow Jordan down. She made for the big house. Flying through the kitchen door, she toppled a chair as she went by, praying that Jordan didn't hurt herself getting by it. Making her way through several more rooms and creating obstacles, she put a small distance between them.

It would be too easy to get trapped in the house, so Sarah went out the front door. She knew it was a mistake as soon as she did it. There was nowhere to hide. Trees and hedges would not help her. The only thing she could see that might be of some use was the gazebo. She could almost feel Jordan on her heels.

Sarah wanted to stop running and figure out why she was scared. She wasn't sure how it had happened. Taking off from her house had been a game. Somewhere between there and here it had changed. She wanted it to be fun again.

Sarah was steps away from the gazebo when long arms wrapped around her and lifted her off the ground. She screamed as they came to a stop.

"I've got you," Jordan panted into her ear. "I've got you."

Sarah calmed almost immediately. This was Jordan. She was safe.

"You have a safe word," Jordan whispered.

Sarah gulped air for a few seconds as she realized that they were playing. She could stop this whenever she wanted to. Knowing that changed everything. She nodded to let Jordan know she understood.

"You sure can run, girl," Jordan said in a rough tone. "But I've got you now."

The fear receded even more. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you won't be able to walk."

Sarah groaned as she felt her body provide all the lubrication Jordan would need. "Please, mister. Don't."

"You know you want it."

Jordan's hands were everywhere. They were rough and gentle all at once as they stroked her.

"Tell me you want it, girl."

The naked passion in Jordan's voice stripped away Sarah's resistance. Her entire body was trembling with need. Her nipples hardened under his expert touch and her clit was throbbing.

"Tell me you want it."

Sarah cried out as long fingers slipped between her legs and rubbed her clitoris.

"You're so wet," Jordan moaned. "I want you so bad. I want to put my cock in you and make you scream."

Sarah was past thought. She was so close to coming. Her knees began to buckle and she was lowered to the ground. Jordan's hands forced her to her knees and Sarah put her hands down for balance. She felt the dildo between her legs, stroking the length of her sex and she shivered.

"Do you want me? Do you want to feel me inside of you? Filling you up, making you come? Do you want that? Let me fuck you, baby. Let me inside."

Jordan's words were as exciting as her touch. She could feel Jordan's hips rocking against her ass and it was almost more than she could take. She wanted it all.

"Do it," Sarah gasped. "Go inside."

"Say you want me," Jordan growled.

"I want you. Oh, please."

"I'm gonna fuck you, baby."

"Yes yes yes," Sarah chanted mindlessly.

Jordan's hands grasped Sarah by the hips and lifted her knees off the ground. Sarah arched her

back and screamed her pleasure as Jordan plunged into her. Passion overwhelmed her as Jordan pumped into her relentlessly. Nothing existed beyond the onslaught of sensation, but she could feel everything. The burning sun on her back, a cool breeze over heated skin, blades of grass tickling her nipples as they swayed from the force of Jordan's thrusts, powerful hips driving against her ass, the pressure inside pushing her to the edge. The intensity grew and Sarah gasped for air.

Jordan stilled deep within Sarah, her hips grinding and she came with a high pitched ululation of sound. Sarah followed with a soundless scream.

"Good God," Jordan panted. "That was intense."

Sarah groaned aloud as her lover withdrew and lowered her to the ground. Sprawled out in the grass, she concentrated on breathing, her body boneless and spent. She managed to open one eye as Jordan fell to the grass beside her.

"You alright?" Jordan asked.

"Uh huh."

"I didn't hurt you?"

Sarah licked her lips. "You were awesome."

Jordan stretched out with a smirk. "I was, wasn't I?"

Smiling, Sarah managed to roll onto her back. "Yes, you were." The grass tickled, but it was cool and welcome. "You do realize that we are lying naked in your front yard?"

"I ain't nekkid."

Sarah lifted her head to see the dildo rising from Jordan's groin. "I don't think wearing a purple dick qualifies as being clothed."

"It should," Jordan sighed contentedly. "But, we've gotta start doing a better job of using condoms."

"If I'm pregnant, you're in so much trouble."

Jordan laughed helplessly. It was contagious and Sarah laughed with her. They rolled to face each other, the sun coating their bodies with warmth.

"It got a little real for you, didn't it?"

Sarah placed a hand on Jordan's hip, grounding herself on the soft skin. "Yeah. One second it was just a game and the next I was scared. But you made it better."

"It happens like that sometimes," Jordan said with a gentle smile. "Just remember that you can always stop me."

"I know, but can we analyze this some other time?"

Jordan's eyes opened wide. "You have something in mind?"

Sarah trailed her fingers over Jordan's belly, smiling at the catch in Jordan's breathing. "Oh yeah."

"And what might that be?"

"Well, I thought you could do the caveman thing and carry me home," Sarah said coyly. "And then..."

"And then...?"

"I'd like to spend the next hour or so sucking on your clit."

Jordan gulped. "I see."

"It would make me very happy."

"Your happiness is very important to me."

"I know it would be a huge sacrifice on your part..."

"Terrible."

"...But, I'll try to make it up to you."

Jordan climbed to her feet. "The things I do for you..."

"I know." Sarah took Jordan's hand and allowed herself to be pulled up, finding herself over Jordan's shoulder in the next move. Wiggling to get comfortable, she smiled. "You know, the view from here is amazing."

"Oh yeah?"

Sarah reached down with both hands to grab Jordan's backside. "Gitty up, pony boy." She yelped at the swat on her ass.

"Behave yourself."

Feeling the gorgeous backside tighten and relax under her hands, Sarah bit her lip. "Jordan?"

"Yes?"

"Um...that felt strangely good."

Jordan chuckled. "Maybe we can analyze that later, too."

It was Sarah's turn to gulp.

~***~

It was dark when Sarah woke up alone from her nap. It took her a few seconds to remember that Jordan was up at the big house for the players. Sarah stretched until she was dizzy and relaxed with a sigh. She felt really good. School was over and making love with Jordan had been amazing.

After several minutes of indulging in memories of the afternoon's activities, Sarah got up to take a shower. After that, she went in to make herself something to eat. It occurred to her while she ate a sandwich that she didn't have anything to do. There was no reason in the world why she couldn't go up and join Jordan at the party.

That decided, Sarah quickly cleaned the kitchen and went to dress. It wasn't a play party, so she pulled on jeans and a t-shirt.

The big house was quiet. Too quiet. Sarah stopped halfway up the stairs. The door was open. If there was anyone in there, she'd be able to hear them. So, if they weren't upstairs where were they? And if there wasn't anyone there, where was Jordan?

Sarah began searching. She found Jordan in the solarium, sprawled out on the couch hidden behind the waterfall.

"Hey."

"Hi," Jordan said somberly.

"Where is everyone? Did they already leave?"

Jordan stared at her for a moment and then looked away. "There isn't anyone. There hasn't been for a couple of weeks now."

Sarah wasn't sure what to think. "I don't understand."

"They ditched me, okay?"

The angry tone didn't fool Sarah for a second. Jordan was hurting. It explained why Jordan had been depressed. Sarah moved to sit beside her lover, but was careful not to touch her. Not yet.

"You've been up here alone? For weeks? Why didn't you tell me?"

Jordan looked like she was going to cry. "I'm handling it."

Sarah opened her mouth to refute that statement and then paused. Why wasn't Jordan talking to her? What was holding her back? It came to her with quiet certainty. "You're worried that I'll stop seeing you as my top if I see you as anything less than strong and in control."

Jordan sat forward and buried her face in her hands.

Sarah put a hand on Jordan's back and began to rub in small circles. "Oh love, don't you know? It is the essence of who you are, not what you do, that makes you my top. I can't even imagine anything that would change that for me. Listen, you always make me feel like it is an honor and a privilege to be with me."

"It is."

"And so it is for me, too. Is that so hard for you to believe?"

Jordan's hands dropped to hang between her knees.

"You don't have to always be strong or happy or thoughtful for me to love you. I'm not that shallow. If you are hurting, I need you to need me. I need to be the one you can talk to and cry on. I won't think you're weak. I promise."

Jordan was visibly struggling for control of her emotions.

"Tell me what's happening, sweetie."

Jordan spoke with effort. "I thought...they were my friends."

Sarah's heart broke. To have hundreds of friends suddenly abandon you...it would be devastating. Sarah gathered Jordan into her arms as the bigger woman began to sob. She felt terrible that she had not known this was going on. Had Pete known? Had Jordan been carrying the betrayal all alone?

Great, wracking sobs tore from Jordan's slender frame. Sarah cried in empathy. She wanted to hold Jordan close and kiss the wounds until the scars were gone. How could the players have done this? How did they justify it to themselves? Jordan gave and gave to them and all she asked in return was a little loyalty. Sarah hated them.

In time, Jordan calmed, her body limp across Sarah's lap. The sound of the waterfall was enough to fill the silence.

"It's not just the players," Jordan said quietly.

"There's more?"

Jordan nodded. "First it was the shelter business. Then, the other projects I've been working on started scheduling meetings and neglecting to tell me when they are. No one is keeping appointments. The whole town is shutting me out. Some of the lesbian players want to have a regular 'tea party', but the rest...they're just gone."

It was good to know that there were some who still wanted to spend time with Jordan. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I just don't understand how people could do this to you. It's not like you committed a crime or anything. How do they justify stabbing you in the back like this?"

"Maggie was right. They were all just using me and I didn't want to see it. They were imaginary friends and I believed in them. I feel like a fool."

Sarah wasn't sure what to say to make things better for her lover. The scope of the betrayal was too great to repair with a few words. "I think they encouraged you to believe in them, sweetie. It's not your fault."

"It doesn't matter whose fault it is."

"It does to me." The anger she had been holding back began to surface. "I want something bad to fall on every single one of them. I want to hurt them for hurting you. That jackass reporter is still hanging around. I see him sitting in his car outside the front gates now and then. I say we put all the dungeon equipment on the front lawn and let him have his story."

Jordan snorted in mild amusement.

"I mean it. You went to great lengths to protect their privacy and they betrayed you. They deserve to be exposed. Maybe we could find another reporter and have them write a story about how the town has turned on you."

"Nah. I don't want to do that."

"Then we'll think of something else. We can't just do nothing. What they're doing isn't right."

Jordan wiped her face and sat up. "I've had a lot of time to think. I know you love this house..."

"Wrong." Sarah almost smiled at the look of surprise she got. "I like this house, but I don't love it. I don't love your money or your cars or anything else you have. I just love you. If Stephen took all of your money and disappeared, I'd still love you."

"Oh." Jordan's eyes swam with tears, but they didn't fall. "I just assumed..."

Sarah took her lover's hands. "It's just you, sweetie. Nothing else."

Jordan nodded. "That makes this easier."

"Makes what easier?"

"Pitching my idea."

"Go for it."

Jordan took a deep breath and let it go. "Let's get the hell out of here. Fuck this town and fuck the players. Let's go."

Sarah blinked in surprise. "Where?"

"I don't care. Wherever you get a job is fine with me. I've given enough to this city. I don't want to give any more. Find a job you want and we'll go there. Maybe I can start living more of my life as a woman. Maybe I can find some real friends. I just want to be with you and make a life. That's all."

Sarah was not at all against the idea, but it was somewhat of a shock. "What about the house?"

Jordan shrugged. "I don't know yet. Maybe I'll sell it. Maybe I'll donate it to some group that will piss off the city. Turn it into a nudist colony or make it a retreat for transgendered people."

Jordan almost smiled. "That would make me feel pretty good, but it would drive the city crazy. I haven't decided yet."

"What about Maggie?"

"If I have to get down on my knees and beg her to come with us, I will. It won't be easy, but I'll do it. Unless you'd rather it was just the two of us?"

Sarah shook her head. "No. It wouldn't be home without Maggie."

Jordan smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. As to the others, I'll offer to let them come with us, but I don't expect many takers. They have lives here beyond the jobs I give them. I'll set them up before we go, of course, but I think most of them will stay. Maybe even all of them."

Sarah was trying to wrap her head around it all. It was a huge change.

"Listen, baby. I know that it's a lot of responsibility to throw on your shoulders; choosing a new place for us to live. Don't think of it like that. Just look for a job you want. I'll handle the rest."

There was a pleading look in Jordan's eyes and Sarah realized that, in a way, Jordan was asking to be rescued. She needed Sarah to take this step for them. There was no way Sarah was going to let her down. "Alright. Let's do it."

"Really?"

Relief, wonder and hope infused Jordan's face and Sarah couldn't help smiling. "Really." She could hardly breathe through the crushing embrace Jordan gave her. "Easy, love."

"Thank you, baby. Thank you. Anywhere you want to go is fine. I don't care."

Sarah had not really been looking for work, but she had been reading the classifieds. One posted job in particular popped into her head. "Hey. Is yesterday's paper still around?"

"I think so," Jordan said as she pulled back.

"I need to see it."

Jordan found the newspaper in the den. Sarah flipped to the classifieds and quickly found the job she had rejected because it had been too far away for commuting. Now that they were going to move, it was a real possibility. "Take a look at this."

Jordan read the ad. "It's an auto shop."

"I wouldn't be fixing cars. It's basically a bookkeeper position, but I think I'd be the only one in the office. Running the place would kind of be my responsibility."

"They're not going to be able to pay you what you're worth. Not with your education."

"I'm not in it for the money yet. If they can give me the experience I need, it'll be more than fair, as far as I'm concerned. Do you know anything about Edgewater?"

Jordan nodded thoughtfully. "It's not that far. Maybe an hour and a half or two hours to get there, depending on which car I drive," she grinned. "It's pretty. Lots of trees and the river is right there. Much more of an artsy community than this one is."

"Is it the kind of place where you could be happy?"

Jordan dropped the paper and took Sarah's face in her hands. "I would be happy in hell if you were by my side."

"Hopefully, we won't have to find out if that's true," Sarah laughed.

Jordan's kiss lit Sarah up like a Christmas tree. Sarah pulled Jordan's hips closer to her own. "I'll call them on Monday morning. See if I can fax my resume and get an appointment for an interview."

"If you need anything from me, just ask. I'll do whatever I can to help you."

Sarah rubbed her breasts against Jordan as passion filled her. "You know what I want?"

"What's that, baby?"

"Tie me up," Sarah purred, "and do bad things to me."

"I can do that," Jordan said in a husky tone.

Sarah pulled her lover's mouth to her own and surrendered.

~***~

"How does it feel?"

"It's sore. I dread putting on a bra."

"Then don't. Give it a couple of days."

Sarah was fascinated with the silver ring through her left nipple. It was shocking, but so erotic. It had hurt having it done, but not nearly as much as she had feared. Jordan had pulled out all the stops the night before, making love to her repeatedly, the evening culminating in the piercing. At the time, Sarah had considered using her safe word to stop Jordan, but her curiosity had prevailed. Now she was glad she had allowed it. If it wasn't for the throbbing now, she would be playing with it. "How come you only did the one?"

"Gotta have one to play with while that one heals."

Sarah rolled her eyes at Jordan's smirk. "I'm not sure, but I think I really like it."

"I know I do."

Sarah lazily stretched, knowing that Jordan would appreciate the view. "I have almost a whole week off. All I have to do is pick up my cap and gown."

"And the honor cords," Jordan added. "Summa cum laude. I can't tell you how proud I am of you for graduating summa cum laude."

Sarah blushed shyly.

"It makes me feel smarter just being near you."

She giggled. Sarah loved the praise, but she wasn't sure what to do with it. "So, what are we going to do today, oh great and powerful wizard?"

Jordan performed her own morning stretch with a satisfied groan. "We need to talk to Maggie about moving and make sure she's going to come with us. I need to call Pete and have him set up a meeting with the staff. Then, I thought we could go shopping."

"For what?"

Jordan glanced at Sarah's nipple ring and licked her lips. "Jewelry. Lingerie. Whatever."

"I think it's funny that you like to shop."

"I love shopping. Don't you?"

"It's growing on me. Now that I have savings and can afford to actually buy things."

Jordan rose up on an elbow. "I hope you don't think you're paying today."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Jewelry and lingerie sound like entertainment items to me."

"Au contraire. They're a necessity. You can buy lunch."

Sarah suspected that "whose-money-to-use-for-what" would be a recurring battle between them. She was too happy to argue about it today. "Deal."

Jordan leaned over for a quick kiss and rolled out of bed. "Come on, lazy bones. We've got things to do and people to see."

Sarah smiled. Jordan was back.

~***~

When Maggie learned what had been going on, she was as mad as a hornet on methamphetamines after the money ran out. She was slamming pans and cursing a blue streak until she suddenly broke down in tears. Jordan went to her immediately and held her close.

"It's okay, Maggie. You were right. I should have listened to you."

"I never wanted this for you," Maggie sobbed. "How could they? After everything you've done for them, how could they?"

"Shh. It's okay, Mags. Everything is okay."

It took a few minutes to get Maggie calmed and sitting down so they could talk. Sarah kept her fingers crossed. Wherever they ended up, she really wanted Maggie to come with them.

"I never actually thought they would turn on you," Maggie sniffled. "I'm so angry."

"I know. Sarah thinks we should throw all the dungeon equipment outside and have a yard sale."

It wasn't exactly what Sarah had suggested, but it made Maggie snicker so she let it pass.

"It's an excellent idea."

Jordan shook her head. "I'm not going to do that. Regardless of whether they deserve it or not, I made a promise to protect their privacy. I won't go back on my word."

"But they betrayed you! You have to do something!"

Jordan glanced at Sarah before speaking. "We have a plan."

"What is it?"

"Wherever Sarah gets a job, we're going to move there. We're leaving and we..."

"You're running away?" Maggie cried in disbelief. "That's your brilliant plan?"

"Why would I want to stay?" Jordan asked with some exasperation. "I don't want them back as friends. They can't be trusted. As for the committees I've been serving on, screw them. I'm taking my money with us. They'll have to find other sources. I've given enough. I'm done with them."

Maggie sputtered for a moment, then turned her eyes on Sarah. "You support this decision?"

"Yes," Sarah said simply. "They didn't stab me in the back. It's Jordan's decision to make. The only thing I care about is being with her. And you...if you'll come with us."

That stalled Maggie's objections for a moment. "Me?"

"We love you," Jordan said. "We want you to come with us."

"Where?"

Jordan shrugged. "We don't know yet. Wherever Sarah decides to get a job. Right now, she's looking at a job in Edgewater."

"Oh," Maggie said as she relaxed back in her chair. "It's nice there."

"Please, Maggie, come with us," Sarah pleaded. "It'll never be home unless you come with us. Please?"

Maggie studied both of them thoughtfully. "This is the true start of your lives together. Are you sure you want me tagging along?"

Jordan threw up her hands. "What do you want, old woman? An engraved invitation? Yes! We want you to come!"

Maggie folded her arms with a disapproving look. "Don't you take that tone with me, young man. I'll think about it. You want me to uproot myself, leave my friends and traipse off into the

wilderness. I'm going to need some incentive."

Jordan dropped her head to the table and proceeded to bang her forehead on it. "Here it comes."

Sarah wanted to dance. Maggie was coming with them.

"I want my own cottage again, but closer to the house. I'm getting older, you know. I can't be making treks like that anymore. I could break a hip and then where would you be?"

Jordan groaned.

"I want one of those cars like Sarah has," Maggie pronounced. "In candy apple red."

Jordan lifted her head. "It doesn't come in that exact shade."

"Then have it painted. Don't be dense, dear."

Sarah laughed out loud as Jordan scowled. Maggie was in complete control and loving every minute of it.

"Anything else?" Jordan asked with false civility.

"Grandchildren before I die."

The stillness in the room was almost terrifying. Sarah held her breath, waiting for what Jordan would say.

"We have not yet discussed the possibility of having children," Jordan said evenly. "If we do decide it's something we want to do, you'll be the first to know."

Maggie pouted. "But I want your little babies to hold and spoil."

Jordan failed to contain a sigh. "How about a dog? Preferably something that won't bite my ankles and pee on the furniture."

"Deal," Maggie smiled smugly.

Sarah knew it was a foregone conclusion, but she had to ask. "So, you'll come?"

"Hell, yes!"

Sarah jumped up to hug the old woman. "I'm so glad. I was so afraid you wouldn't come with us."

"Of course I'm coming, honey." Maggie chuckled. "Especially since I finally get to have a dog!"

"Why couldn't you have a dog?"

"They don't like me," Jordan said grumpily.

Sarah moved to Jordan's side and ran her fingers through the dark hair. "We'll find one that does."

"Yeah, right." Jordan leaned forward to point at Maggie. "First time it bites me, I'm shaving it bald. Second time, I'm shaving you."

"Yes, dear," Maggie said primly.

~***~

"You should wear this under your gown at graduation."

Sarah turned to look and her mouth fell open. Jordan was holding a sheer red corset. It was almost completely transparent and the cups were clearly not full enough to actually cover her breasts. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" Jordan glanced at the lingerie briefly. "It's going to be freaking hot. You're going to sweat your life away and die of dehydration before they get through the first speech. It only makes sense to wear as little as possible. It's not like anyone will know what you're wearing under that hideous gown anyway. Besides, this doesn't have cups to irritate your..."

Sarah captured the finger wiggling its way toward her pierced nipple. "I am not going to wear that thing for graduation. Just forget about it."

Jordan's bottom lip poked out. "What about in private?"

Sarah blushed from the ground up. "What's the point? It's not going to cover anything."

"Duh. That is the point."

Sarah looked at it again. It was beautiful on the hanger, but there was nothing to it. "You really want to see me in something like that?" Jordan stuck her tongue out and panted like a dog. Sarah had to laugh. "It's your money, sweetie. If you want it, buy it."

"Will you wear it?"

Sarah's blush was becoming life-threatening. She shrugged as though the question were of no consequence and turned away. "Maybe."

"Sweeeet," Jordan said softly.

Jordan was more light-hearted than she'd ever been before and Sarah was enjoying it immensely.

She didn't know how long it would last, but hanging out with happy-go-lucky Jordan was a blast. It made Sarah feel like a teenager with no responsibilities. They'd been in the mall for hours already and had wandered through more than a dozen stores. Except for a couple of CDs and a bottle of cinnamon massage oil, they hadn't bought anything.

Sarah looked back at her lover and smiled. Several lacy-nothings now lay over Jordan's arm. If she didn't intervene, she suspected Jordan would lay out some serious cash filling Sarah's drawers with lingerie. "Hey. I'm getting hungry."

"Just give me a minute."

"Okay. I'm going to step outside."

"Kay."

Foot traffic in the mall was steady, but not overwhelming. Sarah found a padded bench with a view of Jordan and sat down. A woman sat on the next bench cleaning a little boy's hands with a tissue.

Sarah had never considered the possibility of having children. In fact, it had never even occurred to her to think about it. Having children had no place in the plans she'd made for herself.

She shifted her eyes back to her lover. Maybe things were different now. Did Jordan want kids? Considering Sarah's childhood, was she capable of the selflessness that being a mother would require? Was motherhood something she wanted to experience? Who would carry the child?

Picturing Jordan pregnant made her grin. It was so wrong. No, if they were ever to have children, it seemed likely that Sarah would do the bearing. It was certainly something to think about, but there was plenty of time.

Jordan left the lingerie shop with a twinkle in her eye and a smirk on her lips. She looked pretty proud of herself as she dropped down beside Sarah.

"Do I even want to know what you bought?"

"Nope."

"I'm in big trouble, aren't I?"

"Oh yeah."

Sarah laughed. "What are you hungry for?"

Jordan waggled her eyebrows. "That all depends."

"Now, now. There are children about. Behave yourself."

"Later then."

Jordan looked around and then suddenly cocked her head to listen. A blissful smile spread across her features. "Unforgettable." *

"Wha...?"

"That's what you are."

Sarah was stunned. She'd never heard Jordan sing and she was...extraordinary.

"Unforgettable though near or far."

The smooth tenor made chills run up Sarah's spine. Jordan's voice was exquisite. The tone and timber were perfect.

"Like a song of love that clings to me, how the thought of you does things to me."

People were turning to look. Sarah was aware of them, but they didn't matter. The love glowing from Jordan's eyes and the beautiful voice that sang to her were the most important things in the world.

"Never before has someone been more."

Jordan rose to her feet and held a hand out. Sarah took it and was pulled into Jordan's arms.

"Unforgettable in every way."

They began to dance to the music drifting through the mall, their bodies moving together as if they had been crafted as a single unit. Sarah's eyes were riveted on her lover.

"And forever more, that's how you'll stay. That's why, darling, it's incredible that someone so unforgettable, thinks that I am unforgettable, too."

Sarah swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I didn't know you could sing," she said softly.

"With you in my arms, I can do anything."

Sarah thought her heart would burst with joy. "Do I tell you enough how very much I love you?"

"Yes, baby. You do."

Jordan continued the song in full voice. "Unforgettable in every way, and forever more, that's how you'll stay. That's why, darling, it's incredible that someone so unforgettable, thinks that I am unforgettable, too."

Their lips met in a gentle kiss as the music ended.

"I love you," Jordan whispered.

"I love you, too. So very much."

Applause erupted around them. A good number of people were smiling and laughing at them. Even Jordan was blushing at the unexpected attention.

"I've decided on Chinese for lunch," Jordan said as they picked up their bags.

Sarah couldn't help but look at the people watching them. Every single one of them was smiling at her with genuine warmth. It made her feel blessed. She took Jordan's hand openly and let her heart lead the way.

~***~

First thing on Monday morning, Sarah contacted Family Motors in Edgewater about the job opening and spoke with a woman named Kelly. She arranged to send her resume by fax and was given an appointment for an interview on Friday afternoon. This was perfect for Sarah. Graduation was scheduled for early afternoon on Thursday. She knew that Jordan had a party scheduled for her on Thursday evening. She wasn't supposed to know, but Janet had spilled the beans about being invited to it. Tamar was going to be there as well. Sarah suspected some of the staff would be there, too.

Jordan wanted to go with her on Friday to get another look at Edgewater. Sarah thought it was a great idea. It wasn't a long drive, but it would be a day away for both of them. Besides, it would be nice to have the emotional support.

They were leaving on Sunday for parts unknown. Sarah still didn't know where they were going and Jordan wouldn't let her pack. Apparently, they were going without luggage of any kind. Sarah was allowed to bring her passport, her driver's license and the digital camera. That was it. It made Sarah feel a little lost and out of control, but it was also very exciting. They could end up anywhere. Suddenly the world felt like a very big place.

Sarah sat down and composed an introductory letter for her resume. She worried about stating that she wouldn't be available to start work for two weeks, but she would need that time. If it cost her the job, so be it. The delay was unavoidable. There was the mystery trip for the first week and, if she got the job, they would need at least a week to relocate. Even that would make for a very rushed move. Jordan was planning for them to stay in a motel or bed and breakfast until they found a suitable house. Sarah knew there would be a lot of traveling back and forth from Anderson to Edgewater before they were settled.

Of course, if she didn't get the job, they would have plenty of time to organize a move while she searched for something else. She felt the responsibility of it all keenly, but Jordan was quite

relaxed about how it would all turn out. She didn't seem to care at all where they ended up. Sarah had gone online and read about Edgewater. It looked very promising and she kept her mental fingers crossed about getting the job. It wasn't so far away that they would lose touch with the staff and Maggie could still see the friends she had in Anderson. Edgewater would be perfect for them all.

While Jordan was filling Pete in on their plans, Sarah drove the Hummer into the city for her cap and gown. She stopped at a U-Haul store on the way home and bought boxes for Maggie and herself. It went against her grain to buy boxes. They were hideously expensive. Left to her own devices, Sarah would have hunted for stray boxes behind supermarkets and liquor stores, but Jordan wouldn't hear of it. Sarah gave in, but it still hurt to hand over Jordan's credit card and spend several hundred dollars on cardboard boxes that would only be used once.

She spent the rest of the afternoon packing her books, CD's and winter clothes. There was no sense waiting until after they got back from gallivanting about the planet.

After dinner with Maggie and Jordan, the staff started arriving for the meeting. Sarah was surprised to see that their families had come with them. Jordan explained that the families would be affected and should be part of the process. Sarah felt enormous pride that Jordan was the kind of employer who would make that distinction. She really was an extraordinary person.

The meeting was to be held in the formal dining room. The table was large enough for all of the adults to sit comfortably. Maggie gathered the smaller children off to one side and was helping them make necklaces out of Fruit Loops and mini marshmallows.

After nearly a year on the estate, Sarah finally met Joey, the young man who tended the indoor plants and the solarium. She was very surprised to learn that he was autistic. Joey interacted very little with the staff, choosing instead to stand by a window, rocking from one side to the other while he alternately chewed on his thumb and tugged at his forelock. Jordan spent several minutes with him in silent conversation, an arm around his shoulders. He seemed calmer while Jordan was with him. Sarah had never dealt with anyone who was autistic. She had not the slightest idea how to approach him, so she left him alone. She wondered why no one had told her of Joey's condition.

Joey had come with his mother. Sarah spoke to her for several minutes, pleased to meet another person who thought Jordan made the sun rise and shine.

When everyone was ready, Jordan quickly laid out recent events for them. A wave of outrage swept the table. Sarah grinned as they expressed their indignation. This would be good for Jordan. She needed to see that there were people who would get angry on her behalf for the way she was being treated.

Jordan calmed them down before continuing. "As satisfying as it might be to exact a little retribution, we've decided that's not the way to go. It wouldn't gain us anything but enmity. Until this happened, I hadn't realized how unhappy I'd become with the life I created for myself. I'm tired of the players and what they do upstairs. I'm tired of arguing endlessly with the city about

who's going to plant a tree or put benches on Main Street. I want something different."

Jordan took a deep breath. "Sarah will be looking for a job soon. We talked it over and decided not to limit her options to Anderson."

Several people gasped.

"You're moving?" Wendy asked in dismay.

"There's no reason to panic," Jordan said quickly. "Sarah doesn't even have a job yet, so this isn't happening tomorrow. Even when we do decide on a place to go, it will take some time to make it happen. No one's out of a job just yet. In fact, it may be that none of you will be out of a job."

"This isn't right," Brent scowled.

Adam nodded his agreement. "Damn straight. Screw this town. You should fight back. Not run away."

"I'm not running away from anything," Jordan protested. "I'm tired of all this. Now that everything is out in the open, I can finally relax and be myself. This city isn't going to accept me for being different. I want to go someplace where I can make a fresh start. Maybe I can do it right this time."

"What are you going to do with the house?" Wendy asked.

"I don't know yet," Jordan shrugged. "We might sell it. Or we might donate it to some organization. In any case, until we figure it out, we're going to need people to take care of it. The other thing to consider is that we will likely need staff wherever we end up. Those of you that want to come with us are welcome. Moving expenses will be taken care of. If, down the road, we sell this house, those of you who remained behind will have the option to join us or look for other work. You will receive generous severance packages. No one will be left out in the cold."

Missy, the quiet one who had helped Sarah with her cufflinks on New Year's Eve, was near tears. "It's not just the job. Maybe you don't know how important this place is to some of us. I don't have anyone else. This is my family. You are my family. I don't want to lose anyone. If I stay or go, part of my family will be gone."

Amanda put an arm around the crying woman. "All families grow and change," she said calmly. "It's never easy, but it doesn't mean the changes can't be good ones. I think that this move will open up all sorts of possibilities for everyone. Follow your hearts and trust in each other. This is not the end."

Leroy spoke up while everyone was thinking. "Any idea where you might be goin'?"

Jordan looked near tears herself, so Sarah stepped into the discussion. "I have an interview in Edgewater on Friday. It looks like a nice place and it's not too far."

Leroy nodded his head. "There's some good fishin' up there. I reckon it's as good a place as any."

"I might not get it," Sarah warned.

"Don't matter none," he drawled. "I'll be comin' with you."

Jordan folded her arms on the table. "I hired every one of you because I liked you. I've come to...love each of you. Leaving anyone behind will hurt. A lot. There's plenty of time to decide what you want to do. Talk to your families. Come to me if you have any questions or ideas. But I want you to know that if you decide to find other jobs, I will always be there if you need me. For anything. Missy is right. You are my family and I will care about you even if you decide to work for someone else."

Jordan's chair screeched on the floor as she stood up. "Take your time. I don't need answers today. Let me know what you decide to do."

Sarah glanced at the looks of grief and confusion on her co-workers' faces before following Jordan from the room. She hadn't thought too much about how the news would be taken before the meeting. Now she understood that this was going to be difficult for everyone. Especially Jordan. Her lover would take full responsibility for the anguish they would feel. It was in Jordan's nature to do so.

It was in Sarah's nature to do whatever she could to ease the burden Jordan felt. She followed her tall lover into the den and watched her pour a drink. "I don't think I knew how difficult that would be. I'm sorry."

Jordan shook her head as she sat down and cradled the brandy in her hands. "It's not your fault."

Sarah moved to sit on the footstool in front of Jordan. "I know."

"We're doing the right thing," Jordan said with a sigh. "I can feel it. I just wish..."

Placing her hands on Jordan's knees, Sarah scooted a bit closer. "So do I, sweetie. But maybe they'll come with us. Leroy already committed to it. Others will follow. And maybe, after the ones who stay with the house have had a chance to think about it, they'll come, too."

Jordan was fighting tears. "I hope so. They are my family, you know."

"I know. Remember Emily?"

"Of course. I talked to her the other day. Why?"

"She told me my first day that this would be my family if I let it. She was right. This is a pretty special place and it's because of you."

"I just..."

"It's because of you," Sarah insisted. "You are a very special person. They don't work for you because of the money. They do it because they love you. They love you because you give them love, respect, compassion and loyalty. No one is like that, Jordan. Out in the real world, people aren't like that. Maybe a little bit when it suits their purposes to be, but only rarely. I think most of the staff will come with us. Especially if I can get the job in Edgewater. They won't feel like they are going so far from home."

"Don't put that kind of pressure on yourself, little one."

"Too late," Sarah grinned. "I want that job so bad I can taste it. I don't care what it pays or what kind of work I have to do. I talked to them this morning and the woman was really nice. You know how sometimes you just get a feeling?"

Jordan smiled. "Like the feeling I had about you."

"Yes, well, okay." Sarah was blushing. "Anyway, I had that feeling this morning on the phone. If they are considering anyone else, I'm going to make them change their minds. That job is mine."

"That's not what you said in the staff meeting."

"Well, I suppose there's a slight chance that I might not get it. There could be an earthquake or a tornado or something. I can't be held responsible for acts of God."

"Baby," Jordan said with a relaxed smile, "you are an act of God."

A knock at the door prevented Sarah from ravishing Jordan where she sat.

"Come in," Jordan called out.

Pete and Amanda came in holding hands. "Hey, boss," the big man said.

"Hey. Grab a drink. Have a seat."

Amanda shook her head and sat down close to them. "I'm fine."

"Thanks for what you said in there," Jordan said as Pete went to pour a drink.

"It was only the truth."

Sarah turned so she could see Amanda, but kept a hand on Jordan. "Is Missy okay?"

Amanda grinned. "She's going with you."

Sarah squeezed Jordan's knee at the news. "Excellent."

Pete sat down beside his wife and took her hand. "We've got something to tell you."

Jordan cocked her head. "Okay."

The smiles Pete and Amanda wore made Sarah's eyes go wide. Somehow she just knew. Sarah threw both arms up in the air. "Yes!"

"What am I missing?" Jordan frowned.

Sarah clapped her hands over her mouth and did a happy dance on the footstool.

Amanda did the honors. "We're pregnant."

Jordan leapt to her feet, her drink falling to the carpet unnoticed. "Are you shitting me?"

Pete was puffed up like an old bullfrog in mating season. "I'm gonna be a daddy."

Jordan all but jumped on Pete to hug him and then turned on his lap to hug Amanda, too. "This is so great! A baby!"

"Oof," Pete grunted. "Get your fat ass off me, you pig."

Laughing, Jordan bounced up and down on the big man. "Get used to it, buddy. The kid is gonna be dancing on the jewels before you know it."

"Jeez! Knock it off! We want more than one, you know."

Jordan shifted to sit on the coffee table. "A baby. Amazing. How far along are you? When is it due?"

"Only two months," Amanda explained. "He's due around Christmas."

"She," Pete interjected.

Amanda patted his leg absently. "We haven't told anyone else yet. We wanted to wait until the second trimester. We're only telling you today because we have more news."

Sarah slid over next to Jordan and put an arm around her waist. "Good news, I hope."

"I had already decided on taking a year off from teaching to have the baby," Amanda said. "Then Pete came home today to tell me about your plans."

Pete grinned, his white teeth flashing. "We want to come with you."

Jordan put a hand to her chest as tears rolled down her face. "Do you mean it?"

"Edgewater's not far," Pete explained, "but it's far enough to give us some breathing room from the family. If we stay here, we won't see the baby until she's a teenager. Besides, you're my best friend. We're going with you."

Jordan ended up between them, hugging them as well as she could. "I love you guys."

Sarah was fighting her own tears of happiness. Jordan would have been devastated without Pete. She would have tried to hide it, but she would have been lost inside. Sarah was equally as glad that Amanda would be coming. She was growing closer to Amanda all the time. Losing that friendship would have been terrible.

"I'm so happy for you," Sarah said. "I can't wait to meet the baby, but I'm so glad you're going to come with us."

"Hey," Jordan exclaimed to Amanda. "Do you want a job?"

Amanda raised an eyebrow. "What kind of job?"

"Maggie wants grandbabies. I'll pay you to let her fuss over you. Anything to take the pressure off of us."

Amanda laughed. "Sorry, Jordan. I can't let you pay me for something I'm looking forward to."

"You two should have children, too," Pete said. "Our kids could grow up together."

"Hey," Jordan said in a warning tone. "We just found each other. Let us have some time together. We'll talk about it when we're good and ready."

Amanda reached out for Sarah and pulled her into the pile. "Do you think Edgewater is ready for us?"

It was a giant group hug with Pete and Amanda holding them together. Sarah giggled. This family thing was incredible. It was good to know it was only going to grow.

~***~

Sarah was wearing a skirt and blouse under the gown and now she regretted it. Jordan had been right. It was hot as blazes. Graduation was being held on the football field and the sun was turning the black robe into a solar oven. The temperature was only in the low 80's, but that was enough to make it miserable. The shade of her mortar board did absolutely nothing to alleviate her discomfort.

The only enjoyable part of the entire ceremony had been receiving her diploma. In spite of instructions not to from the chancellor of the university, Jordan, Maggie, Pete, Amanda, the rest of the staff and their families had stood up and cheered for her, disrupting the ceremony for

several minutes. It had been embarrassing, but Sarah loved them for it. It was the first time in her life that anyone had done something like that. She would never forget it.

Except for the heat, it had been a wonderful day. She had woken to Jordan singing "Baby, if I'm the bottom, you're the top" in the shower. The lyrics had been so ludicrous that she'd dissolved in laughter. It was funny how waking up laughing could make your whole day brighter. Especially when it was followed by hours of delicious love-making.

Maggie had put together a veritable feast for breakfast and most of the staff had joined them. While some of them had not yet committed to following them, everyone was relaxed and lighthearted. The consensus over breakfast was that the very best graduation speech possible could be summed up in three words:

Get a job.

Sarah was wishing now that the speakers knew that. She had tried to listen for the first half hour, but now she was just waiting for it to be over. She couldn't even understand the words being spoken anymore. It was all just a blur. All she could think about was getting out of her clothes and taking a cool shower.

And ice cold lemonade. A whole pitcher full. She could almost taste it.

Sarah dozed for a while and woke as everyone around her stood up. Scrambling to join them, she grabbed her mortar board as a group yell split the air and caps went flying. No way was she going to lose hers.

It was over! The last eight years of her life had reached the finish line. Sarah took off her cap and let her head fall back. She had launched herself at the future like a pit bull and ended up in a place she had never dared to dream of. All of the sacrifices she'd made over the years were worth it.

The graduates slowly scattered and Sarah wound her way through them in search of Jordan and a drink of water.

"There she is!"

Sarah turned to grin at her friends. Both looked as hot and tired as she felt, but there was an aura of excitement about them as well. "Hey! How were the cheap seats?"

"Bite me," Tamar grinned.

"She graduates Some Come Loudly and thinks she owns the place," Janet snorted.

Sarah had not heard the bastardization of her honors title before and it struck her as funny. She laughed until she snorted and that set her friends off as well. The three of them ended up in a hug and the laughter gentled. "You are coming to the party, right?"

"I've gotta grab my folks," Janet said, "but then I'll be there."

"I'm hoping to catch a ride with you," Tamar hinted.

None of Tamar's family could be bothered to attend her graduation. They didn't feel obligated to provide their support since they disapproved of her goals. Sarah knew exactly how that felt and tightened her arm around Tamar's waist. "That would be great. As soon as I find Jordan we can go."

"I'm gonna miss you guys," Janet said quietly.

A wave of affection swept through Sarah. "I wish I looked up years earlier and met you both. You've become such good friends in such a short time."

"Edgewater isn't far."

Sarah grinned at Janet. "Not far at all." She looked up at Tamar and felt a pang in her chest. "You're the one I'm afraid we'll lose contact with. You're going so far away."

Tamar shook her head. "We'll stay in touch. Maybe we can even get together over holidays and summers."

"You have a standing invitation," Sarah insisted. "You'd better count on coming to see me every chance you get. If you don't, I'll send Jordan after you."

Tamar smiled. "I wouldn't object to that."

Sarah pinched her side. "She's all mine."

And then she saw her. Tall and beautiful with a huge smile on her face. Sarah's heart opened to eternity. "Speaking of which...here comes what I'm going to do with the rest of my life."

Sarah hitched up her gown and ran into her future.

* Disclaimer: I put a song in this chapter. "Unforgettable" written by Irving Gordon was used without permission. (I couldn't help it. It's such an awesome romantic song. Especially the version sung by Natalie Cole where she gets to sing with her legendary father, Nat King Cole. Please don't sue me. I bought the MP3 and put it on my Zen. It's on my favorites playlist. Shouldn't that be taken into consideration?)

[Continued...](#)

~ The Dark Side of the Moon ~

by BadSquirrel

Disclaimers: This is an original work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, places or events is a complete and total accident. Most of my stories take place in the fictional city of Edgewater. This one is centered in the not too distant city of Anderson, but there is a tie-in. Just wait for it.

Standard Content Warning: There will be angst, sex, a little rough language and rampant lesbianism. If this is not your cup of tea, don't drink it. If you are not old enough to read this, you will be soon. It might be in your best interest to wait until you are older. If you live in a place where this is not legal...why are you still living there? Maybe it's time for you to move on.

Specific Content Warning: This story centers around the BDSM lifestyle. It references dungeons, Masters, dominance, submission, cross-dressers, sex toys, spanking, heterosexuality and much conversation about such things. While I made an effort not to be overly graphic in the arts and practices of BDSM, there may be some readers who will be offended by the subject itself. Do not read this story if talk of bondage, dominance, submission and sado-masochism cause you distress.

Feedback: I'm still not so great with answering my emails. For those of you who have questions or comments, The Atheneum has kindly consented to allow me a forum. I actually read it and I've been pretty good about responding to posts. Feel free to drop me a line there.

Thanks: I had some help on this one. Mac read my story and offered some great advice. Some of it I took and some of it I didn't. She's not responsible for any grammatical errors or story-line inconsistencies. But I thank her from the bottom of my heart for making time to read my story and showing me the error of my ways.

Epilogue

"Thank you for coming in. We'll be in touch when we've finished interviewing the other applicants." Kelly shut the door to her office and shook her head. "Unbelievable."

"If you hire her, I'm leaving you."

Kelly chuckled. "As if."

Hannah put her elbow on the desk and propped her chin in her hand. "Didn't anyone ever tell her that popping gum non-stop does not make a good impression? It was all I could do not to reach over and dig it out of her mouth."

Kelly shuddered. "Nasty image. Besides, she looked like a biter to me."

"And did she even try to comb her hair? Did she look in the mirror before leaving the house and think 'I look good'?" Hannah huffed tiredly. "This seemed like such a great idea. Too bad we haven't had any serious responses."

Kelly stooped to kiss her girlfriend's head before sitting down. "I'm sure they were all serious, hon. They just weren't right for us. But, we do have one more to go and her resume is very impressive."

"True, but she's young."

Kelly opened the next applicant's file. "Young, but with eight years of work experience and four years of college. These references are glowing. She might be exactly what we're hoping for."

"Maybe. But can we afford her? She's got a Master's in Business Administration. I'm not sure she understands that this is still a small business. It's growing, but it's not a Fortune 500 company."

Kelly smoothed the rim of an imaginary fedora with her fingers and a quirky grin. "Stick with me, babe. We're gonna be rich."

Hannah yawned. "Oh, all right."

"That's the spirit." Kelly leaned over to kiss her partner. "If she's not what we want, we'll just keep looking."

"Okay, but if she's chewing gum or flashing her tits, I'm not going to be held responsible for my actions."

"Sounds like a plan."

The resume and references *were* very impressive. Kelly had been intrigued from the first moment she had received them by fax. Only one of the other applicants had even bothered to provide a resume and it had been pathetic in comparison. She had a feeling about this one. If the girl was at all presentable and personable, Kelly was ready to hire her. That was why Hannah was taking a day off from her own work to help do the interviews. Hannah helped Kelly stay focused on the long term ramifications. All Kelly truly cared about was getting out of the office and back to the work she loved.

At the knock on the door, they glanced at each other hopefully and prepared themselves for the last interview of the day. Kelly stood up and went to open the door.

If she were not already in love with the most beautiful woman in the world, Kelly would have drooled. Standing in front of her was the second most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She was wearing pressed black slacks and a royal blue blouse that Kelly suspected was silk. For accessories, there was a slender gold bracelet and small gold hoops in the young woman's ears. All in all, she looked quite comfortable, but very professional. The girl was about Hannah's height, but that's where the similarity ended. She had long blonde hair, large blue eyes, flawless skin, and features that even the best models would kill for. She was almost too perfectly exquisite.

Kelly knew in an instant that Hannah would never approve of this young woman. Women didn't like it when their mates hired the young and beautiful as assistants. It was too much temptation. Or, at least, it might be for some. Even as lovely as this young woman was, Kelly knew that she would never stray. She had the best. Nothing was worth risking losing the love she had and nothing this girl had to offer could possibly match what Hannah gave her every day.

"Hello. My name is Sarah Wylie. I'm here to interview for the office manager position."

Kelly sighed internally. Hannah might not approve, but they still had to carry on. She put her hand out and shook the small, warm hand. At least it was a firm handshake. Not like some of the limp noodles she'd had to endure that day. "Hi. I'm Kelly Lowell. Come on in."

"Thank you."

Closing the door, Kelly shrugged at her partner over the girl's head. "This is Hannah Reece; my wife and business partner."

The young blonde turned to look at Kelly with a genuine smile of pleasure and then turned to offer a hand to Hannah. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Hannah looked intrigued. "Thanks for coming in. Have a seat."

"Thanks."

The three of them settled into their chairs before Kelly began. "Okay. Let me tell you a bit about the business and what we're looking for before we start asking a bunch of questions."

Sarah Wylie nodded, her eyes interested and clear.

Kelly glanced at her wife, surprised to find her relaxed and alert, then dove into her spiel. "This garage has been my dream for a long time. Two and a half years ago, my wife and I decided it was time to make it a reality. It took a year and a half to get the location, the money and the approvals to get it started. Not to mention the night classes I took so I had a basic understanding of how to run a business and do the accounting. Family Motors has been up and running for a year now. It was slow at first, but we're making serious progress now. We've got five full time mechanics and one high school kid who works a couple of hours a day in the afternoons. He does clean-up and plays gopher. We've also got a guy who does nothing but drive the tow truck. We're

open six days a week, but the office manager position is Monday through Friday. The reason that I'm looking to hire an office manager is because I hate working in the office. I started this business because I love working on cars and trucks. The paper work is sucking the life out of me."

Sarah laughed and it was a delightful sound. She cocked her head in Hannah's direction. "And why are *you* looking for an office manager?"

Hannah returned the laugh. "I want my mechanic back. Not the grumpy bear she's becoming."

"I see."

"I'm not that bad," Kelly grumbled.

"Not yet," Hannah teased lovingly, "but you will be if we don't get you back in the pits, elbow deep in grease and dirt."

Smiling, Sarah crossed her legs and rested her hands in her lap. "Tell me a little more about the position, please."

Kelly was starting to feel *really* good about this applicant. She was calm, collected and had a sense of humor. A big plus was the ease with which she was handling two women as lovers and partners.

"What I need is someone to take over billing, accounts receivable, payroll, ordering parts and expense reports. If we're busy out in the garage we might need some help with answering phones, but for the most part we've got that covered."

"What about taxes?"

"We're contracted with a local accounting firm for state and federal taxes. I could never wrap my head around that stuff."

Sarah nodded thoughtfully. "Hypothetically speaking, that might be something we could incorporate into the position at a future date. I'd have to take some classes in order to feel competent to take it on, of course, but it is a possibility to be considered."

Kelly blinked in pleasant surprise. "Okay."

Sarah waited quietly and Kelly tried to think of something to say. "Do you know anything about cars?"

"Only in regards to basic maintenance. I used to have an old Toyota that required a lot of pampering. I learned how to do tune-ups and oil changes to save myself some money. I can change a tire and wiper blades as well. Beyond that, I'm very much a novice."

Kelly leaned forward to fold her arms on the desk. "Used to have. What do you drive now?"

"A modified Prius."

"Modified?"

"A friend of mine heard about two guys that invented a lithium ion battery pack that goes in the back of the car and increases the mileage. He contacted them, learned how to do it and put one in my car."

Kelly was fascinated. "I heard about that. What kind of mileage do you get now?"

Sarah's smile was just a tad smug. "One hundred and four miles per gallon. Fifty miles at a time. After that it goes back to the normal forty-five until you charge it back up."

"*Sweet*. Can I look at it?"

"Unfortunately, it's not here. We came up in my girlfriend's car."

It took a few seconds for the words to register. Kelly whispered out of the side of her mouth, but never took her eyes off of Sarah. "She's family, hon."

"I caught that, babe," Hannah whispered back as Sarah grinned.

"What does your girlfriend drive?"

Sarah hesitated. "Um...she brought the Aston Martin."

"*Aston Martin?*"

"The V12 Vanquish."

Kelly fell back in her chair and put a hand to her chest. "I think I'm having a seizure."

"I think we're a little off track here," Hannah interjected. "I'll take over while Lug Nut here pulls herself together."

Kelly twitched a few times just for effect and considered drooling.

"Do you have any questions about the position?"

Sarah was smiling. "I do, but I believe they would only require answering if I am chosen to fill the position. I understand the basic nature of what you require. If you'd like to ask me some questions, I'd be happy to answer."

"All right," Hannah said seriously. "You know what we are looking for. What are you looking

for?"

"I'm looking for experience," Sarah said easily. "I have a Master's degree in Small Business Administration and no experience whatsoever in running a small business. I am looking for a company that is willing to teach me to do what I've been going to school to learn. My dream is to someday start my own business. As it stands right now, I am completely unprepared to do that and have any hope of success."

It was a very good answer. Kelly relaxed and let Hannah run with it.

"Why are you applying here? Wasn't there anything available in Anderson?"

"There are many job opportunities in Anderson, but none that would give me the scope of experience I am seeking. I had several reasons for answering your ad." Sarah adjusted her shoulders and went on. "My girlfriend and I are unhappy in Anderson and we are looking to relocate. I was not familiar with Edgewater beyond its general location, but Jordan said it was very nice here and she'd heard good things about the community. From what I've seen so far, she was right. It's beautiful here. Another reason was that your ad intrigued me. Specifically, the line about wanting someone who could grow with the company. I like the idea of taking a young business and making it stronger and more solid, but with supervision and guidance every step of the way. It is that kind of experience I am looking for. I was also drawn by the request that only the tolerant and open-minded need apply. It made me want to know more about your business."

"Because you are a lesbian."

"In part, yes."

Hannah seemed pleased. "How much experience are you looking for? How long can we expect you to hang around?"

Sarah's smile faded a bit. "I cannot make absolute commitments at this time. However, my plan has always been to work for five or ten years before investing in my own business. At this point in time, my most serious 'lack' is in life experience. There are no shortcuts. It will take as long as it takes. Rest assured that I am not planning on cutting out in six months to strike out on my own. If you find me to be competent and there are no serious personality conflicts, I expect to be here for a good while."

Hannah was quiet for nearly a minute, her eyes shrewd and thoughtful. "We can't pay a lot. Not what you think you're worth."

Sarah shook her head in denial. "What I expect is to start at a training wage. In time, if I do well and your company prospers because of the work I do, I'll expect a raise, but nothing outrageous. The money is secondary to the education I hope to get. Although, a few perks would be nice here and there."

"Perks?"

Sarah's eyes were dancing. "My very own parking space. A comfortable office chair. A coffee maker. Nubile maidens to fan me in the summer."

Kelly busted out laughing.

"Oh dear," Sarah said dryly. "Did I say that out loud? That was terribly unprofessional."

They were all laughing now.

"I think we can manage a box fan with a mud-flap-girl sticker on it," Kelly managed to choke out.

"Sold!"

Hannah was the one who got the interview back on track. "I do have a few more questions."

Sarah brushed her hair back over one ear and nodded.

Kelly just sat back and enjoyed the show. Hannah was asking specific questions about Sarah's previous work experience and her education. None of it mattered to Kelly. As far as she was concerned, Sarah had the job. If she was half as good as she appeared to be, they would be lucky to have her. Compared to the other applicants, there was no contest.

After fifteen minutes of detailed discussion, Hannah sat back. The scowl on her brow was an indication of deep thought, not displeasure. Kelly gave it a few minutes before asking, "Satisfied?"

"Almost." Hannah's eyes turned hard and cold. "Do I need to worry that you will make a play for either of us?"

Kelly almost choked on her own spit at the audacity of the query. "Hannah!"

"It is a reasonable question," Sarah interjected quickly. "I'm glad it was asked. Especially since I fell in love with my last employer."

Kelly and Hannah were both caught flat-footed. They gaped at the young woman.

Sarah took a calming breath before capturing Kelly's eyes with her own. "You are quite handsome." She turned her eyes to Hannah's darkening ones. "And you are *very* beautiful. From what I have seen so far, I like you both. Not just as individuals, but as a unit. But, here's the thing: neither of you are Jordan. She loves me and I love her. Desperately. She fills the emptiness inside of me with her love and tenderness. There is no one else and there never will be. If either of you are secretly wondering about the possibility of something extra with me, let it go right now. It's just not going to happen. Not ever."

The tone was calm and gentle, but there was steel in the words. There would be no negotiations on the subject. Sarah Wylie was solid to the core. Kelly and Hannah shared a look that spoke of the trust they had in themselves and in each other. There were no secret fantasies within them involving this girl. It was a moment that reaffirmed everything that they were with each other. As one, they broke into grins.

"I like her," Kelly said.

"So do I," Hannah agreed.

"Do we need to talk about this first?"

"We just did, babe."

Kelly reached a hand across the desk with a wide open smile. "Congratulations. You're hired."

Sarah took Kelly's hand with a laugh. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"I stated in my cover letter that I couldn't start for two weeks. Will that work for you?"

"It's going to take me that long to clean this room up for you."

Sarah looked around doubtfully. "You're giving me a corner office right off the bat? I had my heart set on a cubicle. How am I ever going to learn humility?"

Hannah threw her head back in a laugh. "You're going to fit in just fine."

Sarah succumbed to a little happy dance in her chair. "This is so great! Thank you! Thank you very much!"

Kelly found the paper she'd prepared with benefit and salary information. She handed it over the desk. "You might want to look that over before you commit yourself."

Sarah's smile never faltered as she studied the page. "This looks just fine to me, but I won't need the health insurance. I'm fully covered by my girlfriend's policy."

"Okay. Maybe we can add the premiums we won't be paying onto your salary."

Sarah cocked her head thoughtfully. "Or...you can set me up with a budget to redecorate this room. I'll be spending a lot of time in here. It's a little...cold."

Kelly looked around at the dark paneling and the concrete floor. "You don't like this?"

"Do you?"

Kelly dropped her head down between her shoulders and scowled. "You're gonna be prissy about the bathroom, too, aren't you?"

Laughter was lurking around the edges of Sarah's face. "Of course not. Once you get the guys to go outside and start working on that weed problem along the fence, we shouldn't have any problems at all."

All three of them ended up giggling helplessly over that one. Kelly really liked that Sarah was so quick-witted and willing to open up. She would need that kind of humor with the guys. They could be pretty crass at times. At least Sarah wouldn't be defenseless.

"Thank you for taking a chance on me," Sarah said as they calmed. "I'll have a lot of questions to start, but I'm smart and I'll work very hard for you. It won't take me long to catch on. And don't worry that I'll start making lots of changes that no one but me will understand. If I can see a better way to do something, I'll bring it to you before I implement anything."

"That's good to know," Hannah said. "I think you'll be an excellent addition to this madhouse."

"What is it you do here?" Sarah asked Hannah.

"My involvement is purely financial. I have my own business. I groom dogs."

"Oh! Maybe sometime I could pick your brain about running a business?"

"I'd like that."

They spent a few minutes confirming when Sarah would start work, the pay schedule, vacation and sick time, her hours and lunch times. Sarah was accommodating about all of it.

"And the dress code?" Sarah asked.

"We're pretty casual here," Kelly said. "You're not a receptionist, so it's not like you need to dress up. Jeans are fine."

"Don't show what you don't want to share," Hannah added. "Especially around here. The guys are all very nice and usually respectful, but they're still guys. Too much skin brings out the caveman."

"That makes sense. Um...this may not be entirely appropriate, but my girlfriend is out in the parking lot. I'd really like for you to meet her."

Kelly's eyes widened. "An Aston Martin is in my lot? Right now?"

Hannah and Sarah shared a look that made them both laugh and they followed Kelly outside.

"Sometimes she's like a little kid," Hannah said fondly.

"Mine, too," Sarah shared. "It's very endearing."

"That it is."

Kelly was not the only one enamored of the high performance car. There was a small crowd around it. By the time Hannah and Sarah reached it, Kelly had chased them all back to work and was riveted on the shiny machine. She was reverently studying the lines and contours of it.

Hannah watched closely as Sarah joined her girlfriend. Jordan was a surprise. She looked like a man. Not just any man, but the most strikingly handsome man Hannah had ever seen. In fact, even with the small breasts and Sarah's naming of Jordan's gender, Hannah was not entirely convinced of it, but the love their eyes shared when they looked at each other was nearly enough to make one cry. It was like being too near the sun and Hannah had to take a step back.

"Jordan," Sarah said, "this is Hannah Reece and her wife, Kelly Lowell." She looked at her new employers with a peaceful smile. "This is my heart, Jordan Crisp."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Hannah said as she shook the masculine woman's hand.

"Likewise," Jordan spoke in a gentle tenor.

Hannah held her breath as Kelly and Jordan squared off. She wasn't sure what was going to happen next. The air felt charged.

"You're the owner," Jordan began.

"We both are," Kelly clarified. "Nice car."

"Thanks."

"My hands are clean. May I touch it?"

Jordan raised an eyebrow. "Did you hire my girl?"

"Sure did."

Jordan smiled. "Smart move." Keys appeared and flashed through the air. "Go ahead."

Kelly caught the keys with open-mouthed shock. "Seriously?"

"Sure. But if you wreck it, you fix it."

"Deal!"

Kelly paused, inviting Hannah with her eyes to go, but Hannah declined with a small shake of her head. Seconds later, the car was pulling smoothly out of the lot.

Jordan turned to Sarah and swept her off the ground with a swirling hug. "Thank you, baby. I'm so proud of you! "

Hannah turned away to give them some privacy. She could still hear Jordan praising Sarah, but at least they had the illusion of privacy.

There were a lot of questions bubbling inside of Hannah. Aston Martins weren't cheap. Calling it *The* Aston Martin spoke of having several cars to choose from. It spoke of money. Even their clothing screamed money. So, if there was serious money involved, why was Sarah excited about getting a job that would pay her half of what she was worth? And why was her lover thanking her for getting the job?

Hannah watched the two women out of the corner of her eye. They were just too open and sincere to be scheming. Hannah knew there was a lot of story going on and she was dying to hear it. When they started looking around, Hannah turned to them with a smile.

"Is this your first time in Edgewater?"

Over the next twenty minutes, they discussed real estate agents, the gay community, the general attitude in Edgewater and the activities available for having fun. They were talking about hiking trails when Kelly drove the black Vanquish back into the lot. Kelly got out of the car reluctantly and slapped the keys into Jordan's hand.

"Congratulations," she grinned roguishly. "You're my new best friend."

Jordan laughed.

"What about Cantina?" Hannah asked.

"She drives a Nissan."

"It's a Pathfinder."

"It's a glorified station wagon. Do you see this car?" Kelly used both hands to indicate the Aston Martin. "Can't you see how hot it is? I actually *drove* it. That makes me so much hotter than Cantina can handle. Sure, she was my best friend for a long time, but now I have Jordan. She let me drive her awesome car. She would be devastated if I didn't dump Cantina for her. Isn't that right, old buddy, old pal?"

Jordan laughed. "You're just a little car slut, aren't you?"

"Little?" Kelly pulled up her sleeve and made a very impressive muscle with her biceps. "Can you beat that?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think so," Kelly boasted.

"But I can pee standing up."

"She can," Sarah giggled.

Kelly draped herself over Hannah's shoulders with a pout. "Tell me I'm still butch, baby."

Hannah patted Kelly's arm as she winked at Jordan. "Feeling a little feminine?"

"Yeah. And I don't like it. It's...*ooky*."

"I know what will make you feel better, baby."

Kelly wiggled her eyebrows lasciviously. "Me, too."

"Let's introduce Jordan to Freddie."

"That's not what I..." Kelly straightened up. "Oh God. Freddie's going to have an attack of the vapors."

Jordan frowned. "Who's Freddie?"

Hannah and Kelly dissolved in laughter.
