

# ~ The Tropic of Hunter ~

by Cheyne

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Fandom: Xena Uber/Alt/Original

Rating: 18 or NC-17

Summary: Hunter Roberge returns to her hometown after sixteen years to find out why her recently deceased, estranged mother bequeathed her a house and a legacy she doesn't want. Reconnecting with her past becomes a double-edged sword as she encounters a surprise romance and a family she thought she knew.

Disclaimer: Just in case there is a need to say this because the main characters might slightly resemble two gorgeous women we know and love, no infringement is intended to the powers that be at MCA/Universal. Other than that, the story and the characters are mine. Also, there is no such town as Otter Falls, Vermont, so I don't have to change any names to protect the guilty.

Warnings: There is mention of heterosexual sex. If that upsets you, rest assured it's not very good sex. If it is illegal where you live, let me know so that I can move there.

There is violence and there is a recollection of sex between a minor and someone in a fiduciary position. There is recollection of consensual het sex between two teenagers. There is also sex between two women. I hope I have covered all the bases here. Did I mention there is sex between two women? Hot sex?

This is for Rave and Ren, who make me really think about what I am writing. It is also for Roselle, BJ, (Bad)Tyler and Jordyn. They know why.

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1.

My mother was gone.

It almost became a mantra, repeating over and over in my mind as I tolerated the flight from Los Angeles to Chicago to Albany, New York. I mechanically went through the motions as I changed planes in O'Hare, not even cursing that the gate the Delta Boeing 737-800 taxied up to was at the other end of Terminal 3 from where my connecting flight was nestled and I had less than thirty minutes to get there. We had been late taking off from LAX, which delayed our landing which shortened my time to make it from Point A to Point B. Usually, by this time, I would be swearing up a storm and running like a wide receiver going for the touchdown to get there. Today, I just didn't care. If I made it, I made it. If I didn't, I didn't. My mother was gone. There was no hurry

for me to get 'home.'

Home. I had lived away from Otter Falls, Vermont for sixteen years, returning only once for my Uncle David's funeral and yet I still called it 'home.' I had lost track of all my old friends, declined the invitation to attend my tenth high school reunion, corresponded only fleetingly with my brothers and other relatives and hadn't spoken to my mother in any of those sixteen years. I would not have even come back now if she hadn't, for some unexplainable reason, left me her house.

My mother and I were not friends. And for all intents and purposes, I thought she had disowned me. We'd had a stormy relationship ever since I was a little girl, butting heads on everything from what I wore to how I styled my hair to, well, my entire existence, it seemed. She wanted a dainty, frilly, petite little girl that she could raise to be the perfect lady, the perfect wife, the perfect mother. What she got was a headstrong, rough-and-tumble tomboy who defied her at every turn. It wasn't that I didn't love her or respect her growing up, it was just that she was always trying to make me become something I wasn't.

I was the only daughter in a family of three children and maybe that contributed to our contrary relationship. My two brothers, one older and one younger, couldn't do anything wrong while I, on the other hand, couldn't seem to do anything right. I became resentful and rebellious and although I never got into any real trouble, I was the epitome of the word 'handful.'

I think the reason she was on my case all the time was that I was just like my father, a man she simultaneously loved and hated. While both my brothers took after her side of the family with shorter stature, fair skin and curly, light brown hair, I favored the paternal side. I had his silky dark locks, his bronzed skin, his dashing grin and his light blue eyes through which I apparently expressed everything. I had his height and his natural athletic grace. I also had inherited his penchant for beautiful women, which was ultimately my downfall with my mother.

Despite my rigid upbringing, and her being very morally conscientious, religious to a fault, and strict, she tolerated a lot from me. She reluctantly forgave me for refusing to continue to go to worship services on Sunday when I turned thirteen. I didn't have much use for a god who, according to the perpetual sermon, condemned me for being born a lesbian, something I knew I was at eleven-years-old. When all my girl friends started speaking excitedly about all the cute boys in class and I felt the same way they did only it was for an eighth-grader who just happened to be female, I knew I was different and I knew it wasn't a phase. So, I'd be damned if I would go to a church and praise what appeared to me to be a vindictive, almighty lord even though I never told her why I didn't want to go anymore.

My brothers dutifully went and stayed on her good side, both marrying girls they had met from church rather than high school or through work. She forgave me for dating boys who had no ambition, other than to work on their cars and drink, leaving me hating myself for feeling the need to date boys at all but keeping up the charade kept the peace in the house. She forgave me for participating in senior skip day, an incident which got me and ninety-six other twelfth graders a week of detention and she forgave me for nearly getting expelled from school for getting rip-roaring drunk from eating about a dozen vodka-injected oranges at lunch. By fifth period Health

class, my best friend, Lesley, and I were passed out at our desks. By seventh period, I was heaving up what felt like the bottom of my feet in the girl's room, wondering if I was ever going to live through the experience and then knowing if I did, I might not survive what I was in for when I got home. That little incident got Lesley and me suspended for three days and detention for two weeks. It also got me grounded for a month and the silent treatment for almost as long. Not to mention the references to being just like my father...again, a comment that was never said with any pride, let me tell you.

She had even started forgiving me for not being anything like her or never doing anything up to her standard but when she caught me in bed with wife of the minister of the First Congregational Church when I was eighteen, that was unforgivable in her eyes. I was told to leave her house that night and never come back. It was probably the first time in my life when I didn't argue with her. I had never seen that particular look in her eyes or that tone in her voice before and I knew there would be no debating this.

So I went to stay with my father's brother, David, and his family until I saved enough money to leave town, panic-stricken it would get around that I was gay. I wasn't exactly ashamed of who I was but I felt being a lesbian in a homogeneous place like Otter Falls would not exactly be conducive to my living a life where I wasn't under a microscope and constantly apologizing for who and what I was. When I did leave, two months later, with twelve hundred dollars in my pocket, it was by Greyhound Bus, taking me across country in four days. Looking back on it now, I'm still amazed I made it through that experience unscathed. I was fortunate enough to find a room to rent right away and a job, bartending. Although I wasn't legally old enough to drink, I looked and acted twenty-one and the owner decided to take the chance and overlook my age. He told me later that he felt my looks would bring in the men and customers and profit was what it was all about. I worked there, ironically, until I was twenty-one and then moved on to something in which I felt I could make a career.

I thought maybe my mother would cool down after a year or so had passed but my attempts to contact her were ignored. One year became three, then five and before I knew it nine years had passed. When my Uncle David died, I returned to Vermont to pay my respects. I tried to see her then but she pretended not to be home. Any attempts at contacting her by phone also proved fruitless. She had made her decision. I had shown her the ultimate defiance, an unparalleled betrayal and I was as good as dead to her. After that visit, I stopped trying.

And now she was gone. I got the call two days ago from my older brother, Sam, who, even after nearly a decade and a half, never knew what our rift was about. Neither my mother nor I spoke of it to the family which left friends, neighbors and nosy strangers frustratingly ignorant of the reason for the unconquerable abyss between us. When he said those words, "Hunter, Mom died this morning," I didn't cry. I didn't even react. My tears over her were shed long ago and I had none left.

My mother was gone. And so, it seemed, was any chance of ever making things right between us.

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I hated flying. *Hated it.* And it had nothing to do with September 11th or the threat of possible terrorism, although that was always a concern, I hated flying long before any of that. The very idea of being several miles above ground with nothing holding me up or underneath me never set well. You can explain aerodynamics to me until you're blue in the face and I still will never understand how that monstrous hunk of tin can stay so high in the air for so long. The thought that, at any second, the plane could fall out of the sky for any number of technical reasons and slam into the earth like a lawn dart never quite convinced me that flying was the safest form of transportation. When I would express anxiety over an upcoming flight, I always used to hear, "When your time's up, it's up." Understood. But what if the pilot's time is up? Why should I have to suffer the consequences of his or her bad luck?

Actually, once I was up in the air, I was generally okay. I knew, at that point, there wasn't a damned thing I could do if anything did happen so I would try to relax and 'enjoy' the flight. And if I concentrated on something other than I was crammed in a cigar-shaped tube with about one hundred and seventy other people, forty thousand feet in the air, shooting through the sky at five hundred miles per hour, flying was actually bearable.

Unless I was seated next to someone who, regardless of how many polite signals I sent out that I'd rather be left alone, wouldn't shut up. I brought a word puzzle book to keep me occupied and was halfway through a cryptogram when the young man seated to my left, who had introduced himself as Robert - not Rob, not Bob, not Bert - Robert, asked me if he could buy me a drink. I looked up to see a particularly attractive woman moving our way pushing the refreshment cart. I was torn between telling him that he was definitely barking up the wrong tree and I'd arm wrestle him for the flight attendant or if he was going to annoy me the entire flight, he could buy out her cache of Budweiser because I would need it.

Just then the plane started to rumble and shake and the seat belt sign lit up. To a seasoned traveler, it was just a minor bump in the air current but to me, any turbulence was too much. Since I never take my seat belt off while flying anyway, that wasn't a problem but the color draining from my face caught the attention of the older, grandfatherly gentleman seated to my right.

"Don't like flying much, do you?" he asked, his tone and demeanor very paternal and calm.

"What gave me away?" I breathed out, managing a stiff smile for him as we hit another air pocket.

"Your trying to make permanent handle grips out of the arm rests," he nodded toward my knuckles which were, indeed, white.

"You know, I should enjoy it," I said to him, closing my eyes as the plane literally felt like it bucked. "My mother always told me that being on an airplane was the closest to heaven I was ever going to get." We lurched again then dropped a few hundred feet leaving my stomach somewhere near the luggage rack.

He patted my wrist and said, "Nothing to worry about."

I was just about to ease up on my death grasp when we shuddered through one more large disturbance. The captain's voice could be heard advising us that he had turned on the seat belt sign as they'd hit a little 'rough air.' Rough air, my ass...each little vibration sent my life flashing before my eyes.

The flight attendant stopped at our row with the drink cart. Screw the beer, I asked her for a whiskey and water. But what I really wanted was for her to crawl into my lap and comfort me. Had I not been slightly terrified, I would have paid more attention and reacted much differently to the subtle touch and rather flirty, little wink when she handed me my drink. Of course, she could just be feeling sorry for me as I am sure I looked pathetically vulnerable and unusually small for my six foot frame folded into that little seat.

Either the flight had returned to being smooth or after my second whiskey, bypassing the water this time, I downed the little bottle of Jack like a shot, I just didn't care. Seeing me a little more relaxed, Robert suddenly regained the use of his voice. Unfortunately.

"You know what Delta stands for, don't you?" Before I had a chance to answer, he said, "Don't Even Leave The Airport." I smiled politely as he repeated it, laughing, emphasizing the acronym by poking his finger in the air after each word. I was about to tell him I had heard that one before but it didn't matter. Honestly, any Delta flight I had taken in the past had always been without incident but I wasn't about to tell him that, either. "So what's in Albany for you?"

"A funeral." I knew he was fishing and I wasn't about to tell him that Albany wasn't my final destination. For some reason, men just didn't want to believe that I had no interest in being with them. First, I would get the 'what - you think you're too good for me?' attitude and then, if I was blunt about my orientation, I would get the cliché , 'Obviously you haven't been with the right man yet.' Somehow I knew Robert would not disappoint me if I told him thanks but no thanks and why. The fact that I would never see this man again after we landed in Albany prompted me to not reveal any more about myself than necessary.

"Who died?"

"My mother."

"Oh. I'm sorry." He obviously felt very awkward, not knowing what else to say and I took that opportunity to bury my nose back into my puzzle book. Robert was silent the rest of the flight.

On our descent into Albany, the plane once again rattled and shook as we cut through clouds. Looking out the window to my right, I grimaced. Flying in clouds always made me nervous, too, because there was no visibility. We were getting ready to land, getting closer to the ground with every second, I wanted the pilots to be able to *see* the airport, *see* the runway, *see* if there were any other planes in our vicinity.

"So, Ms Legs-That-Start-At-Her-Shoulders, how tall are you, anyway?" came the question from the man to my right with the kind eyes. He was trying to distract me from concentrating on what the plane was doing.

"Five feet twelve," I answered. It was my standard reply as it somehow made people feel less intimidated than my saying six feet. I was, in reality, just a hair under the six foot mark but not enough to really claim five eleven. By the time I was sixteen, I was two inches shorter than I am now. Thankfully I was good in basketball because I was the team's center whether I wanted to be or not.

"That must keep some men at bay."

"You have no idea." The plane shook hard as we slipped below the cloud cover and then smoothed out as land, trees, houses and roads came into view. I heard and felt the wheels come down and I could not wait to get on solid ground.

Still thinking I needed a diversion, the man said, "Know how to tell who lands the plane?"

I looked at him, quizzically. "I certainly hope the pilot lands the plane."

"Not always. Sometimes the co-pilot does."

This perked me up. "Okay...how can you tell?"

"When we land, if you feel the right wheel touch the ground first, the co-pilot is at the controls, if the left wheel touches first, the pilot's landing the plane."

I found that utterly fascinating as I never really paid attention and thought both wheels hit the ground at the same time. When I knew that we were about to connect with Mother Earth again, I focused intently and felt the right wheel touch the ground a half second before the left one did. I looked up at my seat companion, feeling like a little kid in school about to raise her hand with the correct answer. "The co-pilot, right?"

He nodded, laughing at my enthusiasm. Of course, I had no idea if it was true but the concept enthralled me. I wouldn't have minded talking to him during the flight instead of Robert, as he did not appear to be after anything other than pleasant conversation. As we taxied up to the terminal, I felt as though I had somehow lost out on something important by not getting acquainted with this distinguished-looking gentleman.

Disembarking the plane, my drink-serving stewardess said goodbye to me with another smile and wink that would have caused me to wait around inside for her under different circumstances and get her phone number but it was a little after five o'clock PM and I still had a two hour drive ahead of me, fifty miles of it on a two lane country highway. I really wanted to pick up my rental car and be on my way.

I wasn't exactly sure what awaited me when I got to Otter Falls but I did know that my life there

would never be the same again.

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2.

The sun was setting when I drove through the outskirts of Otter Falls, population now a little over seventeen thousand. The small city had grown more than I ever expected it to since the town always seemed so resistant to change. I guess the need to boost the economy overcame the desire to stay quaint as I passed a Super Wal-Mart, three chain drug stores almost in a row, a Home Depot and several fast food restaurants on the main drag leading into downtown.

Before I found myself in a situation of snarled congestion, if downtown was anything like I remembered it at dinner time on a week night, I pulled over and called Sam to get directions to his new house. Otter Falls had not changed so much where I couldn't have remembered how to get to his old address but he was now living in a newly built housing section on the north side of town and I was too tired to try and find it on my own.

I really could have stopped somewhere for a beer or two and relaxed a little before facing the family and it was a temptation as there appeared to be some kind of bar or eating establishment that also served alcohol on every corner. Seems some things never changed. Regardless of the businesses that had cropped up over the last decade, it did not deter the town's favorite past time of drinking. There was really nothing much else to do here unless you skied, which a majority of the townspeople didn't. They couldn't stand the attitude and crush of flatlanders, who swept into the resorts at the first sign of snow, taking over the mountain that loomed over the area. So, the locals preferred to stay away from the ski lodges and bars that littered the access road and keep the city taverns in business by patronizing them instead. Frequently. Otter Falls once made the record books for having more bars per capita than any city in the USA and there was a reason for that.

Deciding to wait until I got to Sam's to have a beer, I smiled because, despite his grief over losing mom, he sounded excited that I was finally here. After speaking with him, I felt a familiar warmth that I always used to get around Sam when we were together, growing up. My older brother was a good guy, recognizing all those years ago that my being forced to live in his shadow and the unfair comparisons were neither of our faults. It wasn't because he was so perfect and I was so imperfect, it was that he followed all the rules and did everything that was expected of him and I did not. Sam knew that regardless of how hard I tried to please my mother, it was never good enough and I finally just gave up trying. Every time mom and I would have a fight and I would get sent to my room, Sam would always try to console me or cheer me up. Even if he never actually spoke up and said anything to her about her blatant bias. I understood the position he was in and even though I am sure his punishment wouldn't have amounted to much, our mother had a volcanic temper and it was not wise as, I was sure, he learned through me, to invoke her wrath.

My younger brother, Dane, was a different story altogether. He was three years behind me and spoiled rotten. Well, as spoiled as my mother would allow. Dane was sneaky and conniving and

calculated his moves wisely. He was smart enough to never go after Sam because he knew Sam was the golden boy but he had no problem taking advantage of our mother's dislike for me and set me up every chance he got. He was always successful at making himself look good by making me look bad. He contributed to my life being a living hell at home, something in which he seemed to take great joy and pride. The only time I ever got even with him was when I tied him up, gagged him and shaved all those curly locks off his head before his freshman dance with his dream girl. As vain as he was about his appearance, especially about his hair, it made the necessary statement to him, even if he did whine to my mother afterwards. By that time I was seventeen and had a part-time job after school and on the weekends, so grounding me didn't have the impact it had in the past. And it was worth it.

From what I understood, Dane hadn't changed much. He was still behaving like a spoiled child, only now he was doing it in adult situations. I didn't talk to my younger brother much through phone calls or emails because we were not close and any communication between us usually ended on a sour note. I really think the only reason he contacted me at all was to see if he could weasel out of me why mom and I weren't speaking. Sam had advised me that Dane was less than thrilled that mom's house had not been left to him and to expect trouble from him. I didn't say anything to Sam but the house had no sentimental value to me, held a lot of bad memories and although I could have used the money from the sale, I didn't really want the hassle. I lived too far away to deal with the legalities and time it would take to get rid of it, so if Dane really wanted it at this point, I wasn't above signing it over to him.

The three of us grew up being called by our middle names. Sam was born Gregory Samuel Roberge, Jr., named, of course, after my father. Two Gregs around the house was confusing, so he became Sam, which was the first name of my grandfather. I was named Sarah Hunter, Sarah also being my mother's name, so to avoid confusion again, I was called Hunter, which was my mother's maiden name. Three years after me, Jonathan Dane came along. Jonathan after my maternal grandfather and Dane because my mom loved "The Thornbirds."

My father was a roguish man, loaded with charm and he knew how to use it. When he met my mother, an absolutely stunning woman who was pursued by many of his friends, he knew he had to be the one to get her. He swept her off her feet and seduced her with lies and promises he never intended to keep. My mother was one of the rare few women who actually saved herself for her wedding night and I think if she had not, there never would have been a marriage. However, the only way my father could get her into bed was to marry her. So he did.

In his defense, he tried to behave and according to my Uncle David, my father remained faithful until after I was born. I guess three years was the longest he'd ever been with one person only and he could stand it no longer and started cheating on her shortly after I had been brought home from the hospital. My mother became aware of it when one of his many conquests called the house in a fit of rage that he had dumped her for the next pretty face. Angry, hurt and mortified, she threatened my father with divorce and it surprised me that he never jumped at the chance, as it would have meant his freedom. Yet he apologized profusely, swore he would never do it again and pretended to be upholding his marriage vows while he still continued to sleep around. After Dane was born, my mother found detailed love letters hidden in a box in the garage, written from three separate women. My father came home to all of his belongings scattered on the front lawn.

She never spoke to him again. He agreed to all the conditions of the divorce and on the rare occasion he would come pick us up for the weekend, we would meet him out by his car. When I was thirteen, he just stopped showing up. Uncle David told us later that dad had met a young woman, moved to Florida with her and had two more children. My brothers and I got a Christmas card from him once. I was fifteen. It was the last time I heard from him.

When Uncle David died suddenly of a heart attack seven years ago, we all expected my father to show up at the funeral but he didn't. He acknowledged his brother's death with an impersonal, generic sympathy card. I was actually disappointed as I was torn between not wanting to see him and wanting to see him so I could tear into him for being the selfish prick he turned out to be. I firmly believed that if he had been the faithful husband and father my mother believed him to be when she married him, my life may have been a little easier. Every time she looked at me, she saw him and I reminded her of what she might have had and what she never did.

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I pulled into the driveway of an impressive ranch house with a huge, well manicured lawn. Even though the sun had set and it was dark, the track lighting strategically placed at the walkway and other dominant areas illuminated the landscaping admirably. There were four other cars parked in front of me, and I wondered who they belonged to, thinking Sam was lucky to have such a long, wide driveway to be able to fit them all without having the butt end of any sticking out in the road.

Walking to the screened door, I knocked twice and entered. I followed the sound of the voices which led me up a small flight of five stairs and then found myself in an archway that left me standing in a living room full of people. I recognized the back of Sam's head and reached between two people to poke him. Turning, his eyes immediately welled up and he pulled me into an embrace.

"Hunter."

As I hugged him fiercely, I heard a few mild gasps and all conversation stopped. When my brother released me and we both looked in the direction of the living room, all eyes were on us both.

"Oh my god, Hunter..." Sam's wife, Trina, took two steps toward me and enfolded me into her long arms. She had put on a few pounds since the last time I had seen her and it looked wonderful on her. She was way too skinny before. "How dare you get more gorgeous than the last time we saw you."

I believe I was actually blushing. Before I had a chance to respond to that, I heard the unmistakable sniveling voice of my younger brother.

"Well, if it isn't the prodigal daughter, returning home to collect her...due..."

Letting go of my sister-in-law, I smiled, patiently, giving Dane a blatant once-over. He had a glass in his hand, containing what I could only guess to be some kind of alcohol. His expression was disdainful, his tone of voice was downright snotty, and he was slightly slurring his words. "Well, well, well, if it isn't my baby brother. You haven't changed. Except..." I deliberately focused on the top of his head. "...hair's looking a little sparse there. Guess that doesn't want to stay around you any longer than anything else..."

*And she scores!* His expression was one of surprise and frustration that I had landed a direct hit with my first sentence. The ground rules had to be established immediately and I needed Dane to know that I was neither impressed by his status in the community nor intimidated by his loyal place at our mother's side. A few snickers could be heard around the room and Dane's eyebrows slanted downward, forming a V, his expression wounded but still indignant. "Well...it's obvious you haven't changed, either." He brought the glass to his lips and took a big swallow. "You don't belong here, Hunter."

"I'm not here by choice, Dane."

"Of course you are. You could have easily chosen to stay in California and done any of your business through your attorney."

"I don't have an attorney on retainer, Dane. I don't need one." A smirk curled my lips, knowing I'd managed another direct hit and one he most definitely would not dispute in front of an audience. According to Sam, Dane had been pulled over for DUI at least three different times in the past year and it was only through a well-connected lawyer that he had managed to keep it hushed up and out of the local paper. I had further discovered through a few other sources that my baby brother was a homophobic elitist who had won a local alderman seat through his very dirty campaign against an openly gay opponent. He preyed on the fears of the town that civil unions and same-sex marriage would be the downfall of western civilization as we know it and the man he was running against would only further the 'homosexual agenda' in the community. But the real clincher was he drugged up a supposedly expunged record that his opponent had been arrested for drunk driving at the age of twenty-two, telling the public, "How can we trust his judgment making town council decisions when he can't even judge when it's too dangerous to get behind the wheel of a car?"

Yes, my little brother was a hypocritical bastard. But then, in my experience, most homophobes are. The fact that he was a politician on top of it only added to his 'charm.'

"Okay, that's enough," Trina spoke up, good-naturedly. "Time to retreat to your corners." She hooked her arm through mine and addressed the other people gathered in the living room. "For those of you who don't know, this is Sam and Dane's sister, Hunter." I was then introduced or re-introduced to the twelve other people in the room. Eleven of them I had never met before and that included Dane's disagreeable-looking third wife, Emma. She didn't seem to appreciate it when we shook hands and I gave her my sincerest condolences for being married to my brother.

The one person I did know, however, was someone I would have rather not seen. At least not until I had been in town longer than five minutes. Phil Khaury had taken me to my senior prom. I

had not wanted to go but got talked into it by my friends. Lesley wanted us to share the prom experience together and she convinced me that it would be fun. And it was. Until I got so trashed that I almost let Phil fuck me in the back seat of his car that night. Fortunately, I came to my senses and I was strong back then because if I hadn't put on the brakes, I would have had an evening for which I never would have forgiven myself. Phil had been difficult to cool down at first and got a little aggressive but nothing a knee to the groin didn't fix. We didn't exactly part friends that night and I ended up walking two miles home wearing a floor-length, off the shoulder, satin gown in low heels, swearing and cursing every step of the way. It was one of the rare times I actually got into a dress and, truth be told, I was enjoying it. It was the first time I realized that I could have a feminine side without betraying my sexuality.

When Phil looked at me, there were several conversations going on behind his eyes and each seemed to be broadcasting in neon across his forehead like the ticker in Times Square. The first was the most obvious as, hound that he still clearly was, his eyes leered hungrily over my body and when he finally pulled them out of my cleavage, he focused on my annoyed face. The next expression he wore revealed that he then remembered the last time we had seen each other, I had ripped him a new asshole for spreading around town that he had, indeed, nailed me on prom night. That rumor got back to my mother and regardless of how much I denied it, I still got grounded and had to listen to a tirade on moral character every night for two weeks. No amount of grief I gave Phil could ever make up for that unbearable fourteen days. If he had anything going for him at all, it was that at least he told everyone that I was a phenomenal lay.

"Hello, Phil," I crossed my arms.

"God...Hunter, you look...great." He waited, expecting me to return the compliment. I gleefully disappointed him. I couldn't deny that he was a handsome man and that he wore his thirties well, looking more rugged and mature than he had a right to. But my grown up assumption of him went right out the window when he gave me that boyish grin, stuck his hands in his pockets and said, "So...are you here with anyone?"

I shook my head in disbelief, although I should not have been surprised. "I'm here in my brother's house, at a gathering that is paying respects to my dead mother...and you're trying to pick me up?"

He looked immediately embarrassed. Taking a step backward, he put his hands up in front of him in surrender. "No, no, I wasn't, I...you took that wrong..."

Why is it when some people get caught saying or doing something inappropriate, instead of admitting it, apologizing and moving on, they always try to put the blame on their target by either saying 'you took it wrong' or 'I was only joking. Can't you take a joke?' knowing full well that if the situation had been received positively, they would have taken the ball and run with it? "Then what were you asking me, so that I can take it right?"

"Uh...is your husband with you?"

"I'm not married."

"Really?" His eyebrows shot up and he didn't even try to hide his delight at that answer. "How long are you going to be in town?"

I rolled my eyes and walked away from him, shaking my head.

"What? What'd I say?" He actually sounded bewildered.

I joined my brother in the kitchen. "Sam, do you have any beer?" He opened up the refrigerator and handed me a Longtrail Blackberry Wheat. I handed it back. "A real beer?"

He gave me a half-grin and looked in the back on the bottom shelf. "The only other kind I have is a Foster's Lager."

"I'll take it." Removing the cap and tossing it in the basket, I think I drank half the bottle before putting it down on the counter. "I'd love to catch up and get all the details of what I'm in for the next few days but I think that will have to wait until everyone's gone home and I'm not sure I can hang out that long."

"Pretty tired?"

"It's been a long day."

"Are you going to stay at the house?" he asked, referring to mom's.

"I figured I would, I hadn't made any other arrangements. That's if Dane doesn't have it booby-trapped." I took another pull from the bottle.

Sam smiled and leaned in close, lowering his voice. "Nothing that little fucker would do would surprise me."

I nearly spit beer out my nose. Sam took the Foster's from me and started pounding me on the back. I waved him away before he broke a rib.

"I'm sorry, did I offend you?" my dear brother asked, sincerely concerned.

"Yes. Watch your fucking mouth next time," I rasped.

Wide-eyed, Sam then roared with laughter, relieved and pulled me into a hug. "God, I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." And, up until that point, I had no idea just how much.

He reached in a drawer and pulled out a set of keys, separating them and holding up one in particular. "This is the key to mom's front door." He then indicated the next four keys. "This is the back door key, the key to the door that leads to the garage, the garage door key and this is the

key to the Wrangler in the garage." He had a distinct twinkle in his eye.

"Wrangler? Are you telling me mom drove a Jeep or is there a cowboy in the garage?"

"Mom had a Camry which needs a new transmission so it's out of commission. The Jeep is Eric's. We're keeping it there while he's at school." Eric was his step-son who was away at college. Trina was five years older than Sam and had been widowed when they met. They had not had any children together and my brother raised Eric as his own.

"Where is Eric? Is he coming home for the funeral?"

"No, he can't get away. I told him not to sweat it. Mom knew he loved her, his coming back here when it's a hassle isn't necessary."

"He won't mind that I drive his car while I'm here?"

"Hey - We bought him that car and I'm paying the insurance. And what he doesn't know won't hurt him. Just don't wreck it." He handed me the set of keys. "Oh by the way, you've also inherited Orion."

Oh, no. That cat hated me. I couldn't believe that tough old feline with the attitude of a pit bull on crack was still alive. Must have been the pure nastiness flowing through her veins that kept her going. She was a year old when I was kicked out and I still have scars from that little bitch attacking me. I also woke up to many unwanted crawling and slithering 'gifts' she had brought inside and dropped in my bed. I swear if she wasn't trying to kill me with a blood infection, she was trying to give me a heart attack. I was sure she had only become more cunning and ornery in her older years. That's probably why my mother left me the house...so Orion could finish me off.

After that, I changed my mind and decided to go to a bar when I left.

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3.

Regardless of how progressive Otter Falls was becoming, there were still no gay bars in town. I only knew this because I had checked online before I left Los Angeles. I was disappointed for two reasons, the first being that it would have been nice to be able to have a beer or two in an establishment where I could relax and be myself and the second being that I would love to have seen who frequented the bar and if I knew or recognized them. There were a few people in high school I had no doubt, I would have run into there. All male, of course, but it would have been interesting to see if I had guessed correctly.

Instead, I drove downtown, passed a few watering holes I had sneaked into when I was a senior. They weren't the classiest of joints but I recalled the drafts had been cheap and because they still looked like dives and even more run down than I remembered, I decided to bypass them and look for something a little more palatable. There used to be a running joke that went, 'What do you say to compliment someone from Otter Falls?' and the response was, 'Hey, nice tooth.' That

never seemed truer than what I witnessed hanging outside the Main Street Saloon, a bar that used to have an...interesting...atmosphere sixteen years ago. 'Interesting' seemed to have turned to 'menacing' if the size of the doorman was any indication. No doubt I would have recognized a few people in that place, too.

I then passed the First Congregational Church and felt an involuntary smile creep onto my face. Although it was the downfall of my already fragile relationship with my mother, I still recall the day the minister's wife seduced me.

*Apparently my mother had met with the new pastor regarding my rebellious behavior and sacrilegious attitude toward the church. And, as I seemed to 'bond' more closely with women, she requested that maybe his wife should arrange to speak with me. Reverend Charles Visson, an attractive man in his early thirties was very persuasive and, at first, tried to talk my mother into me meeting with him instead. My mother was unyielding, knowing I would have blown him off immediately, regardless of how charming he may have been. She soon learned he was nowhere near as charismatic and persuasive as his gorgeous wife.*

*I had always wondered why my brothers had nicknamed his wife Mrs. Vixen until she walked into the pizza place where I worked, looking for me. My three male co-workers, all under the age of eighteen, fell over each other trying to wait on her. It was like a scene right out of 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' with lust-filled bulging eyes and tongues down to the floor. I almost expected to hear horns, bells and whistles. However, everything went limp (and I'm pretty sure I do mean everything) when she asked specifically for me.*

*Not knowing who she was but definitely intrigued by this sexy vision seated at Table Six, wondering what she could possibly want with me, I wiped my hands on my ingredient-stained waist apron and approached her, my overloaded teenage hormones also working overtime. I stood at the table's edge as her incredible light brown eyes started at my boots and slowly traversed the length of my body, appreciatively, until our eyes finally met. I swallowed hard, a little flustered by such a bold, open appraisal, my brain quickly turning to oatmeal and I finally was able to get out, "You wanted to see me?" I knew it had to be wishful thinking that this woman was a lesbian and was going to proposition me with something hopefully indecent.*

*"My, you are a tall one." Her voice was like silk, smooth and refined, and she smiled at me, an expression I found quite captivating at the time, and maybe I still would today. It was that smile that told me something was indeed going to happen between whoever this woman was and me. I don't know how I knew, not having experience beyond some kissing and fumbling (with a girl from a rival basketball team), but it was something I just instinctively felt. "Please sit." She gestured across the table with a well-manicured, short-nailed (thank goodness) hand.*

*"I don't get off for another forty-five minutes." I had no clue how true that statement was to become. "Can you tell me what this is about?" I studied her quite intently. Well, as intently as one could when one's lower regions were unexpectedly detonating, making it extremely difficult to focus on anything other than, well, one's own lower regions.*

*She had streaked blonde hair, worn in a shoulder-length style that was very becoming to her,*

*framing her face in a way which accented her slender nose, cheekbones and full, sensuous lips. Although I had dreamed of being with a woman, I was still a virgin at that point of my life and could only imagine what that mouth would feel like on my body. If I hadn't known any better, I would have believed she had channeled my x-rated thoughts as she licked her bottom lip slowly. My eyes then unceremoniously fell to her ample cleavage, unabashedly revealed in a purple tank top covered by a lavender blouse, with four buttons undone from the top. When my brain engaged again and I realized I was ogling her breasts, I snapped my attention back to her face which had absorbed my gawking with a knowing smirk. She extended her hand to me. "I'm Jennifer Visson. I was sent here to chat with you."*

*"Visson?" Then it hit me. "The preacher's wife?" She nodded. Well. Any and all fantasies should have gone right down the drain yet that insistent feeling that we were destined to be intimate kept jabbing me in the libido. "Why do you want to chat with me? Who sent you?" I know I must have looked confused because I was confused.*

*"I was asked to come here by your mother who wants me to talk you into coming back to church."*

*I blinked at her, torn between being pissed at my mother's unrealistic persistence and thinking if I got to see Mrs. Visson at least once a week, what I actually might return to church to worship would have been caused by a lure other than Reverend Visson's sermons. I excused myself to speak to my boss about ending my shift early. Since customers had been few and far between and he knew the woman I was talking to should have meant religious business, he told me to go punch out. I did, quickly checking my rather flour-dusted reflection in the locker room mirror and returned to the table, sitting opposite her. "I don't want to be disrespectful, Mrs. Vix - Visson..." Fuck. I couldn't believe I almost called her that. I refused to look at her, in case she was aware of the nickname and it embarrassed her. Embarrassed her? I was mortified. I then felt her fingers curl around my wrist, prompting me to glance up at her.*

*Smiling warmly, she said, "Please call me Jennifer." She didn't let go of my wrist.*

*I really thought I was going to be a puddle in the chair, I was so turned on. "Jennifer," I repeated, hoarsely. "I don't know what your husband preaches but Reverend Riffey just preached hate and intolerance. And he and his family were very hypocritical. That's why I stopped going. The congregation talked horribly about him through the week, then kissed his ass on Sunday, agreeing with every destructive and hateful thing that man said, ready to do his dirty work and further his agenda, whether they agreed with him or not. That's why I stopped going. I wasn't interested in being one of the little rats that pried piper led around." She was lightly rubbing her thumb over the inside of my wrist. It was driving me crazy.*

*"That certainly makes sense and is more than a valid reason," she nodded. "My husband has entirely different values." Her thumb stopped breezing over my wrist while she slightly increased her pressure on her grasp and I got lost in the beckoning in her eyes. "As do I. Why don't we go somewhere and talk about bringing you back into the...fold."*

*In what seemed like a blur, we got to my house. It was in her car where she told me she had been*

*watching me for a few days, finding out all she could about me as, originally, she would have used that information to personalize whatever she would say to try and talk me into rejoining the congregation. But the more she observed me and what my mother told her about my interest, hobbies and extra curricular activities at school, the more she realized that I was most likely gay. When I didn't dispute her conclusion, she confessed that she was bisexual and she had a passion for busting female virgins and wanted me very much. I was eighteen and didn't realize how crude or rapacious that was at the time and frankly, I didn't care. I just wanted her to touch me in places I had only touched myself as I was ready to spontaneously climax.*

*Expressing concern about being discovered by my family members, Jennifer assured me that my mother would be helping out at the church for the next couple of hours, as she did one night every week. She further reminded me that Sam was scheduled to be at work until nine that night and Dane should have been in his favorite class, political science, and then bullying his classmates in debate club until seven. She really had done her homework.*

*We had barely made it through the door when she starting kissing me. I had about four inches on her so regardless of her being the aggressor, I felt I was in the dominant position. I had no idea what to do with my hands and they did some spastic dance at my sides and then behind her head before she finally grabbed one and placed it on her waist. My other hand finally found a resting place in her hair. Then my faculties decided to return and the art of making out started feeling somewhat inherent again. When she broke the kiss, I thought I was going to need oxygen because the sensation had been so sexual and because I forgot to breathe. I came back at her like an uncivilized Pepe LePew and she halted me with her hands and requested that I take a quick shower. She had a point. I smelled like a pepperoni pizza. Well, it could have been worse; I could have smelled like anchovies.*

*Taking the stairs two at a time, I hit that stall faster than I'd ever done anything before and just scrubbed the most important parts. When I returned to my room to comb my hair, Jennifer was in my bed, naked.*

*Within five minutes, it was over for me. All she did was put her mouth on my nipple and, with one flick of her tongue, an orgasm washed over my body like a small wave. I now know how a man feels about premature ejaculation. Not deterred, she then, with extreme patience, did things to my body that I had only read about in my father's hidden Penthouse Forum stash, left in a box in the garage. All that did was cement my orientation. If I had any question before, it was gone. My sexual catechism was thorough and she left me quivering and greedy for more.*

*Then she deftly guided me in what to do to make love to her and I discovered that I liked pleasing her and the reaction she had to my touch almost as much as I liked being pleased. Almost. By the time she left, I was addicted to her. Remembering her earlier declaration made me wonder, later on, who else in town she may have 'busted' before me and when she would get tired of me, as I was no longer a virgin. Obviously I had something that kept her coming back for more (and I was hoping it wasn't that I fucked like an amateur because I think I conquered that awkward, clumsy stage by her third visit).*

*We managed to arrange to meet at least four days a week for the next month, until the fateful*

*afternoon when my mother came home early and with us being so heavily into our fucking, we never heard the downstairs door close and her call our names. However, we did hear the sharp intake of breath and the 'dear sweet Jesus' when she opened my door and saw her precious minister's wife's face buried in my crotch.*

Looking back on it, I was grateful to Jennifer for being my physical introduction to all things carnal. She awakened my lesbianism to eternal consciousness...but I wished she, being the sex-savvy adult and the one in control, had directed us somewhere other than the convenience of my mother's empty house. We were just begging to get caught. If I had been anything but a horny teenager, craving this new love like a hummingbird seeks out nectar, I would have suggested another location in-between getting laid. We had played with fire and ended up dancing with the devil in the depths of hell.

The Vissons left town by the end of the month, Jennifer probably imploring her husband to leave, no doubt influenced by the same fear I had - being found out for who she really was. I know the only reason my mother didn't publicly crucify her was that then everyone would have known about her daughter.

But my mother privately crucified me by banishing me from her life.

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4.

I decided on a new place called The Night Shift. I found out later that it had been there for eight years so it was only new to me. It was spacious with a dark interior and a well set up bar, mostly illuminated by white Christmas lights that bordered the walls where they met the ceiling. As it was just barely past nine o'clock, I was sure the house lights had been dimmed to create a more romantic atmosphere. If it wasn't for the two huge plasma televisions on opposite ends of the room, both showing different news networks with the audio muted and the blaring jukebox music and the knocking together of pool balls, it might have succeeded. Not that it mattered to me; I was only there for the booze.

The bartender had just served me my second Guinness when I heard someone call out, "Hunter? Hunter Roberge, is that you?" I was under the impression I had changed in looks over the past sixteen years but obviously not as much as I thought. I turned toward the female voice and was greeted by the stunned eyes of my high school best friend, Lesley Riordan. What were the odds?

I grinned rather jauntily and said, "Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she had to walk into mine." I stood up to accept her inevitable embrace.

"God, Hunter, I'm so sorry about your mom," she said, while hugging me fiercely.

"Thanks." There was an uncomfortable moment of silence and then she removed her arms from around my shoulders, stepping back, assessing me.

"I was wondering if you were going to come back for her services. Last time I saw Dane and asked about you, he said you and your mom still weren't speaking."

She looked good. She had grown a little taller, which still left her five inches shorter than I was and had maintained a trim figure except somewhere along the way she had acquired an enormous rack. Whether they were natural or silicone, I had no idea, but they were out of proportion with the rest of her body and made her clearly top heavy. Mine weren't small but they were nowhere near as big as hers and my back hurt from lugging these around, I couldn't imagine how her back was managing. If she still jogged, she must have had to wear the sports bra from hell. Other than that, she still looked like my best friend, only sixteen years older, with highlighted auburn hair and overly made up green eyes. Her once pleasant face now had a hardness to it that surprised me, though. I wondered if never leaving this town and dealing with its 'good ol' boy' suppression had done that to her. "We weren't but, for some reason, she left me the house, so I'm back here to deal with that."

"That's the only reason? God, Hunter, that's kind of cold."

I shrugged, not offended by her assumption. It was true. "You know, as well as anyone, that my mother and I never got along, never had a traditional relationship. To pretend it was anything else just because she's dead now would be dishonest and something I won't do."

She seemed to consider this, looking at the floor. "True." She then focused back on me, grinning. "Well, the years have certainly been good to you."

"The years? Jesus, Les, you make me sound ancient. I'm only thirty-four, as are you," I unnecessarily reminded her.

"Well, you look great. Have you seen your brothers yet?"

I sat back down on my stool and she stood next to me. "I just came from Sam's. I had to deal with Dane. That's why I'm here." I held up my beer for emphasis.

"Dane's not such a bad guy. For a politician."

I gestured the empty stool next to me. "Join me?"

"Oh, no, I can't. I'm waiting on a party," she turned and pointed to two long tables pushed together in a corner with four champagne bottles sticking out of ice buckets, two on each table. "I got here early to set up. Hey...why don't you join us?"

The last thing I actually wanted was to be sociable to a group of strangers. Or a group of old acquaintances. "Who are 'us'?" I felt it was only polite to find out before I refused.

"It's Lisa's thirtieth birthday, so it will be her and my parents and -"

"Wait. Your kid sister is thirty? Scrawny, bratty, tag along Lisa?"

She laughed. "Well, yeah. She is four years younger than us, hello."

Okay. Now I did feel ancient. Little Lisa. Thirty.

"Hey, here they are now."

A group of about ten people walked in and I recognized her parents immediately. A little chunkier, a little more gray but Mr. and Mrs. Riordan, nonetheless. As Lesley waved to them and pointed to their tables, she grabbed my sleeve and pulled. "Come on, Hunter, I know they'd love to see you. It'll be like old times."

"Yeah, old times. Your mom blamed me every *old time* we got into trouble even though you," I poked my finger into her stomach, "were the mastermind. What happens if you get drunk tonight? She going to forbid you to see me for two weeks?"

Laughing, she grabbed my finger. "Yeah, she thought you were pretty, um...adventurous..."

"When I left here, she thought I was fast and loose, thanks to Phil Khaury's big mouth even though I..." I looked at her pointedly, "...was probably the only senior who *didn't* get laid on prom night."

Eyes twinkling, Lesley said, "Your loss." She let go of my finger. "Listen, no worries. I 'fessed up to her ten years ago that it wasn't you, it was me who stole daddy's bottle of vodka that time. You just supplied the oranges. She figured out the rest on her own. She's forgiven you. And she still asks occasionally if I ever hear from you. But," she added with some sadness, "I told her I guess when you gave up on your mom, you gave up on the rest of us, too."

I took a long drink of beer. "It wasn't like that, Les. It had nothing to do with any of you and had everything to do with me."

"What does that mean?" She questioned, thoughtfully.

Hmmm. Was this the time? The place? Was I finally going to come out to my childhood best friend, someone I'd been away from as many years as I'd known her? Sure. Why not? I'd kept the secret from this shit hole town long enough. I didn't live here, I no longer had to be concerned with my or my mother's reputation and my brothers could fend for themselves. Sam would cope just fine and I could only hope it would ruin Dane's political aspirations. And, who knows? Maybe no one would even care. Maybe they had already guessed. Maybe no one would be surprised.

Okay. Deep breath. "Well, what it means is that I'm -"

"Lesley, come on! We want to make the toast!" A young man interrupted us, holding a flute of champagne.

"Okay, I'll be right there," she told him then turned back to me. "Come on, Hunter, please...at least come over and say hi even if you don't stay," she whined and pouted and bounced on her heels like a little kid, breasts jiggling threateningly at me.

I moved back slightly, not wanting to risk being beamed by my former best friend's boobs. I rolled my eyes. "Oh, all right." I picked up my beer mug and stood up again. "But if your mother starts counting how many beers I've had, I'm coming back over here."

"She won't." Grabbing my sleeve again, she pulled me through the crowd over to the table where mostly everyone was seated, each holding a full glass of champagne. "Hey, everybody, look who I found over at the bar..."

As I looked around the group, of course the people I had never met were puzzled but the few I recognized, including Lesley's parents, also looked confused. I did a quick scan, trying to figure out which one was Lisa. I had pretty much decided it was the mousy little redhead at the end of the first table, looking a tad irritable that the big celebration was being interrupted.

"Oh, come on, isn't it obvious?" Lesley laughed, gesturing my height, "it's -"

"Hunter Roberge," a voice beside me breathed.

I turned to see who had recognized me. Now...usually in the movies, when a moment like this happened, the film would go all slow motion to underscore the magic of the occasion. And that's exactly how this felt like it happened. I looked down into one of the most naturally beautiful faces I could ever remember seeing, which said a lot, considering, in Los Angeles, pretty faces were a dime a dozen. She had thick, light blonde hair that fell to just below her shoulders, a captivating white smile revealed behind understated red lips, a perfect nose and mesmerizing, sparkling green eyes that were holding me hostage as they attempted to convey a message I was too dazzled to read. There was something about her eyes that did look vaguely familiar but I couldn't place her. *Who was this?* And how did she know me?

As I was about to ask, Mr. and Mrs. Riordan were on their feet, offering me their hugs and condolences. When the formalities of that were behind us, before I found out who the engaging little temptress was who also expressed her sympathy, I figured I'd better say happy birthday to the woman whose party I was probably ruining by unintentionally becoming the focus. I grabbed Lesley's arm before she could move away from me. "Is that Lisa over there?" I subtly pointed to the timid albeit obviously perturbed, bespectacled redhead.

"Oh, heavens, no, that's Dina, Lisa's secretary."

"Lisa has a secretary? What does she do?"

"Jesus, Hunter, you can ask her directly, she's standing right behind you," Lesley folded her arms, amused.

No. It couldn't be. I spun quickly to see that gorgeous enchantress smirking at me, her arms also folded. "Lisa?!"

"Hunter," she acknowledged. Just the way she said my name sent a shiver down my spine. I am sure I looked dumbfounded. She laughed. "What? You still thought I'd look the same at thirty as I did at fourteen?"

I guess I did. Thankfully, I had guessed wrong. Well, at least now I knew why she looked vaguely familiar. She stepped toward me and pulled me into an embrace I enjoyed entirely too much. It was a full body hug, usually the kind only lesbians knew how to give but Lisa had always been an affectionate girl so I was probably reading something into nothing through wishful thinking. "Happy Birthday," I told her, as I reluctantly released her.

"Thank you," she responded, in a tone that sounded almost intimate. She stepped back. "Please join my party, Hunter. I would love to have you celebrate my thirtieth birthday with us."

She didn't have to ask twice. Even if she wasn't gay, she certainly wouldn't be too hard on the eyes for the next couple of hours and preferable to going to my mother's house and facing those memories. I grabbed a chair from a nearby empty table, wedging it between Lisa's harassed-looking secretary and Lesley, who poured me a flute of champagne.

"Can we get this toast over with, so I can have my martini?" Dina finally called out. Well, at least now I knew why she had looked so impatiently peeved.

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5.

I had been introduced around the table and in-between trying to be courteous to any conversation thrown my way, I couldn't stop staring at Lisa. She had become a stunning woman, very poised and polished and every time she engaged me with those intense green eyes, she, quite frankly, left me breathless. Her transformation from immature little girl to sophisticated adult, from gawky adolescent to absolute knockout had been amazing. The thing I remembered about her most was that she was always following Lesley and me around, wanting to be included in whatever we did. I wouldn't object to her following me around anywhere now.

I had alerted on the fact that there was no husband or boyfriend mentioned and she was not wearing an engagement or wedding ring. I was encouraged, even though I knew I was setting myself up for disappointment. But I couldn't help it. I was incredibly drawn to the former little girl who once, in an adorable cowboy costume, told me she would rope the moon for me if I wanted it. She was eight. I suddenly wished she still had that hero worship.

So far, I had learned that Lisa was an environmental lawyer, which I found most impressive. If she had to be a lawyer at all, at least she was working for a noble cause. It was an obvious profession for her as she always loved to argue. Well, at least with Lesley. I had learned that she graduated at the top of her class from the Vermont Law School's Environmental Law Center, where she would occasionally give lectures, that she owned her own house, was the proud 'mommy' of two rescued greyhounds, enjoyed gardening...but still no mention of a significant

other.

I also learned that Lesley was on her second husband who was home with her twin boys from her first marriage. She said she was glad she'd had boys because she would never have wanted two girls the same age who were as exasperating as we had been. That was a terrifying thought. Lesley worked temporary jobs eight months out of the year and then really raked in the bucks waiting tables at one of the major lodge's bar and restaurant during ski season. If I remembered correctly, the hotels didn't pay shit but the tips were exceptional. One of my older cousins put herself through business school on the money she made from waitressing on the mountain.

The conversation came back to my mother again. Mrs. Riordan, who then made a remark about my having had four beers already, not including the ones I'd had before they got there, and she guessed I'd never kicked *that* little habit, asked me outright if my mother and I had spoken to each other before she'd passed away and just what exactly was the problem, anyway. I turned to Lesley with a raised eyebrow. She's forgiven me, eh? It was then I heard Lisa say in a mildly reprimanding voice, "Mother. That's between Hunter and Mrs. Roberge. It's none of our business."

She put a patronizing hand on Lisa's arm and then said in a condescending tone, "I just thought Hunter might like to tell us, dear. I mean Sarah is gone now, what difference could it possibly make?"

Ah, yes. It was all coming back to me now. Mary Lynne Riordan. Town Crier. If someone farted on the opposite side of Otter Falls from her, Mrs. Riordan was on the phone to her sister about it before all the air had been expelled. I should have thanked them for inviting me to join the party, excused myself and returned to the bar but I glanced back at Lisa, who was looking at me with an expression of patient understanding and against my better judgment, despite the fact that I was melting under her gaze, I chose to stay.

"Mrs. Riordan," I began, forcing restraint, "I was not the one who stopped speaking. That was my mother's decision. And, because, it was something that would invade her privacy for me to discuss...even now...I am going to respect her memory and leave it where it belongs." Then I added, sweetly, "I am sure you would expect nothing less from your daughters." Well. That got a warranted redness to rise in the cheeks of Mrs. Riordan, an embarrassed clearing of the throat from Mr. Riordan and a smile that made it all okay from Lisa.

"So, Hunter," Lesley began, breaking the spell, "what is it that you do out there in California?"

"I am a chief ranger in the Angeles National Forest." There was a round of the expected 'ooohs' and I glanced quickly at Lisa to see a look of quiet approval in her eyes as she rested her chin on her folded hands. I was hoping she was still as fascinated with me as I now was with her.

"Wow. You're the chief ranger -" Lesley started.

"No," I corrected, "I am *a* chief ranger, not *the* chief ranger. A chief ranger is a supervisor position."

"What is it you do as a chief ranger?" It was Lesley again.

"You know, this is Lisa's party." I leaned over to Lesley, "we can get together and talk about me any time while I'm here. You only turn thirty once." I returned my attention to the guest of honor, who seemed to be studying me with something akin to amusement. "So, back to you."

And, as if Mrs. Riordan had not even heard me, she said, "Are you married, Hunter?"

Did I detect a hint of concentrated interest in that question from the direction of the party girl? "No, Mrs. Riordan, I'm not." I responded.

"Not now or not ever?"

"Not ever."

"What? A beautiful girl like you?" Mr. Riordan piped up. "What's wrong with all them men out there in the land of fruits and nuts? They all gay?"

"Dad!" That exclamation came from both Riordan daughters and made me laugh. My best friend's parents had not changed.

"What?" He shrugged, throwing his hands in the air, looking sincerely perplexed.

"No, Mr. Riordan. I guess I'm just not the marrying type." I wasn't about to get into my sexuality now. I could only imagine the reaction and I would be damned if I was going to ruin Lisa's special night. But since we were on the subject and it would bring the focus back to Lisa... "What about you, Lisa? Married? Engaged? Divorced? Separated? Boyfriend?" *Girlfriend?*

Among sudden dead silence in the room, Lisa leaned forward on her elbows and said, "Actually, I'm single."

I looked around the table and everyone seemed to find interest elsewhere until Lesley, in her best troublemaker tone said, "Are you going to tell her why you're still single?"

Lisa opened her mouth to say something and Mrs. Riordan cut her off, with a distinct chill in her voice. "Why don't we just leave it at Lisa isn't the marrying type, either."

The expression on Lisa's face was a mixture of annoyance, frustration and amusement, as she shook her head. Glancing back at me, she then cut Lesley a nasty look. "Actually, I'm -"

"Let's change the subject, shall we?" Mary Lynne Riordan's smile was fake and strained.

"You brought the subject up, Mom." Lisa reminded her.

Well, *this* was interesting. What big Riordan mystery had I stumbled upon? Had Lisa been with

someone influential and the relationship was now over, which was somehow embarrassing to her mother? Had she been involved with someone her parents hadn't approved of? Surely, Lisa and I couldn't be sharing the same 'secret.' Could we? That was too much to hope for.

As a smidgen of tension wafted through the air, I took in my surroundings and decided to be the one to change the subject. "This is really a nice place. You all seem comfortable here, is this a regular family stop?" I looked around the table at each Riordan family member.

"Not a regular stop," Mrs. Riordan breathed out, sounding scandalized that I would think she hung out in a bar. "We have been here for *occasions*."

"Yeah," Lisa smirked, "the last *occasion* was the celebration of Lesley's boob job. In her honor, for dinner we had a five and a half pound breast..."

"Lisa!" Mrs. Riordan admonished, nearly snorting out her daiquiri. I almost expelled some beer through my nose, as well. Lesley's jaw dropped slightly but she recovered quickly, grinning like a proud fool. She then stood up pointed to her new additions like Vanna displaying consonants. The table broke into applause and Mrs. Riordan cringed as Lesley sat back down.

"Oh, Mom, please," Lisa laughed, rubbing her mother's shoulder, "If Vermont allowed billboards, Chesty here would have put her girls out there for the world to see. She's proud of those puppies."

"Well, she wasn't naturally blessed like you were, dear," Mrs. Riordan, mumbled, turning to her husband, her expression pleading for rescue.

Doug Riordan did not fulfill her wishes. "Well, hell, Mary Lynne, let her show off the damned things, Wally sure as hell paid enough for 'em. I certainly hope he's gettin' as much enjoyment out of 'em as she is."

"Douglas!!" Mrs. Riordan closed her eyes and hid behind her hand.

"Dad!!" Both his daughters chorused.

"What?!" he said, shrugging, throwing his hands in the air again.

Lisa excused herself to use the bathroom and I wanted to follow her, to ravish her up against the wall of one of the stalls. However, I remained seated and listened to Mr. Riordan drone on about some local sports competition and Mrs. Riordan looking grateful for any diversion.

When her parents were well occupied and lost in conversation with others at the table, Lesley leaned over and said in a hushed voice, "Still know how to stir up trouble, I see."

I kept my attention on my nearly empty beer mug. "I do? How's that?"

"Asking if Lisa's married. That's a sore subject with us all and we all try to avoid it. Even though

she has no problem telling anybody, which only makes it worse."

"And why is that?" Oh please, oh *please*...

Lesley's vocal inflection had moved from being disdainful to downright contemptible. "My dear, sweet, baby sister isn't married because the little perv is a dyke."

As my inner giddy schoolgirl did a happy dance and screamed, *YES!!* and then fell to her knees, pumping her fist in the air, I couldn't ignore the disgusted way my once best friend had presented the situation to me. Her use of the words 'perv' and 'dyke' were emphasized with a particular revulsion that set my teeth on edge. "Is that so?" I said, coolly.

As Lisa walked back to the table, Lesley moved even closer and whispered what she thought was a warning. "Be careful...she's always had a crush on you."

I turned and looked at Lesley, my intention being to match her repugnance for opposite reasons but not wanting to cause a scene. "I'll keep that in mind."

However, I think it backfired when she sat back and said, "Yeah, I have no doubt you can kick her ass if she gets out of line."

I finished my beer and stood up. I wanted to get as far away from Lesley as possible. "Well," I announced, "it's been a long day and the next few days will, no doubt, be even longer. I should get going."

Lesley patted my leg and said, "Call me. Or why don't I just stop by?"

Before I could tell her, 'thanks but no thanks,' Lisa was by my side. "Thanks for joining us, Hunter. Seeing you again was a very nice birthday present." She hugged me again and I embraced her back, giving her an extra squeeze. If I were living here and would have been around to help take the flack it would have caused, I may have just bent her back in my arms and planted a juicy one on her, just to get a reaction. Okay, not *just* to get a reaction but that would have been a worthwhile residual.

Before I released her, I whispered in her ear, "Looks like you have your hands full with this bunch."

I felt her relax and then I heard her say in a voice only I could hear, "Right now I'm just concentrating on having my arms full." I know she must have felt my breath catch and my heart start beating faster.

When she stepped back, she winked at me and suddenly it felt like there was no one else in the room except the two of us. I don't know if anyone else noticed or felt the sparks flying between us and I really didn't care. I can't remember ever feeling such desire for anyone in my life. But before I really did take her in my arms and nail her with searing kiss that would have burned holes in her self-righteous family's eyes, I automatically nodded to everyone and began to back

away, thanking the air for allowing me to join the festivities.

As angry as I was at Lesley's blatant bias against her sister's orientation, I was able to put her out of my mind and concentrate on the fetching surprise that was once the little pest I couldn't wait to get away from. Now, all I could think about was how to find a way to be around her. I suppose I should have been more mindful of her being so young the last time I saw her, the huge gap between our ages back then and all the years that had passed in the meantime. It was difficult to reconcile the awkward, androgynous teenager who I barely considered a 'cute kid,' much less a blip on my gaydar screen with this 'woman-of-my-dreams' status she now was. It was as though I was dealing with two entirely different people and the fourteen-year-old I remembered was a lifetime away from the thirty-year-old who had just incarcerated any common sense I had left. Something that would have been wrong on so many levels sixteen years ago felt instantly and indisputably right and I knew I would have very little, if any, control over my libido if either Ms. Lisa Riordan or I tried to look each other up while I was here.

As I was driving to my mother's, I thanked whatever entity guided me to that bar. At least this journey 'home' wouldn't be a total waste of my time.

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6.

I hesitated before I unlocked the front door. I knew walking inside this house was going to be overwhelming on many levels. I expected the first emotion to hit me to be anger. Anger at what could have been, should have been a loving environment and wasn't and anger at what was lost all those years ago that could never be regained. I felt anger at my mother for always making me feel so inadequate and anger at my mother *and* my father for making me so angry.

But what I felt as I stepped over the threshold was sadness. Sadness for what could have been, should have been a loving environment and wasn't and sadness for what was lost all those years ago that could never be regained. I felt sadness for my mother for always making me feel so inadequate and sadness for my mother *and* my father for making me so angry. I not only had some physical housecleaning facing me, I had some psychological housecleaning to do as well.

I immediately detected the faint scent of the cinnamon apple potpourri she always had littered throughout the house and I unexpectedly choked up. Where had that emotion come from? Swallowing the rather large lump in my throat, I turned on the light and, as my eyes swept the living room and hallway, I was taken back to being the destroyed eighteen-year-old who had walked out that very same door for the last time sixteen years ago.

Walking through the house, things were beginning to feel more familiar again. Other than updating the curtains and a new carpet, she hadn't changed the place since I left. I climbed the stairs and headed for my old room, thinking she had probably turned it into a storage area.

Opening the door, I was shocked to see that everything was exactly as I had left it...except she had made my bed (and washed the sheets, I'm sure). In fact, when I turned up the dimmed light,

it almost looked as if it had been turned into a shrine. As my self-esteem was pretty shattered when I left, I didn't remember having so many photographs of myself spread out all over the room. There were laminated newspaper articles of my basketball achievements in my junior and senior years, which I know I had never attached to the mirror and my varsity and junior varsity trophies were all on display on my bureau. I could only think that Sam must have placed all those mementos there...although I couldn't, for the life of me, understand why my mother would leave them there.

I went down the hall and checked out my brother's old bedrooms. Sam's had been turned into a guest room and Dane's was now a sewing room, which wasn't surprising, she had always love to make clothes and used to sew costumes for two different local dance schools at recital time. I then walked across the hall to my mother's room.

It smelled like her. Or the flower-scented perfume I always remembered her wearing. Island gardenia, I believe it was. It was always a sure-fire, no fail present. She usually ended up with at least three bottles of it every Christmas morning; that and something to do with her sewing. I sat down on her bed, which was still as hard as a rock. She always liked a 'firm' mattress, which translated into meaning a completely unyielding slab of concrete. I never understood how that could have been beneficial to anyone's back. On her nightstand was a framed photograph of her, my brothers and me, taken by Phil Khaury on the night of my senior prom. God, I was so young. And we all looked so deceptively happy. And I'd forgotten how beautiful she used to be.

Next to the picture lay her reading glasses, open, ready for her to slip them on. I ran my thumb over the frame and once again choked up. I shook my head. It didn't have to be like this. I took a deep breath and stood up, my eyes surveying the walls and floors, noticing that, except for a new rug, this room had not changed, either.

After retrieving my suitcases and returning upstairs to put them in the guest room (because it had the queen-sized bed as opposed to my room, which had a twin), I went back down to put a twelve-pack of Guinness in the refrigerator, keeping one out to drink. My thoughts kept returning to earlier in the evening, to the surprise that had been the mesmerizing Lisa Riordan. It was still hard for me to connect the pig-tailed, scrawny, smart-alecky, Pippi Longstocking-looking girl to the incredibly hot lesbian who knocked my socks off tonight. And she knew it, the little brat. She had been quick to recognize that I was a lesbian, too, which impressed me as I was not considered 'stereotypical' and usually it took a blatant act on my part to get that message across, even to other gay women. I snickered when I then remembered that I had been practically leering at her, salivating, how much more obvious could I have gotten?

As I strolled through the living room toward the den, I began to smell something foul. The closer I got, the more overpowering it became. And then I remembered about Orion. Where was she? I didn't particularly like the kamikaze cat but I didn't want to find her dead, either. When I reached the laundry room, off the den, I discovered the source of the powerful odor. The litter box was piled full of shit, like it hadn't been changed in a very long time. I then looked across the room at Orion's food and water dish. Both appeared to be bone dry. I shook my head. Evidently no one had been designated to take care of the cat. Of course, there could be a story behind it, too. Knowing Orion, someone could have tried to feed her and pulled back a bloody stump.

I emptied and cleaned the litter box and then went to search for Orion, calling her name, to no avail. If she wasn't dead from asphyxiation or starvation, I would try filling her bowls with fresh water and tuna I had found in the pantry. The smell of fish must have brought her out of hiding as I heard a soft meow emanate from behind me. Turning, I spotted the gorgeous rust-tinged, unusually ill-tempered Abyssinian, looking up at me, mournfully with black eyes surrounded by green rims. Her attack mode eyes.

"Don't you mew at me like a weakling, you little terrorist, I know what you're capable of." I set her food bowl on the floor next to the water and she trotted over to it, practically inhaling it in one bite. The poor cat was famished.

I picked up the phone in the living room and dialed Sam's number. I knew it was getting late but I had no doubt he was up, probably still entertaining guests. He picked up the phone on the third ring. "Sam. Hunter. Listen, was anyone supposed to be tending to Orion?"

"Yeah. Dane. Why?"

That figured. "Well, he hasn't been doing it. I thought I was going to have to call a haz-mat team and the kitty morgue." I explained what I had found and heard Sam's disgusted sigh.

"He never liked that cat."

"Nobody likes this cat but that doesn't give him the right to neglect her."

"Sorry, Hunter. I'll speak to him about it."

"No, never mind. I'm sure it won't do any good anyway." I studied Orion, as she took a few laps of water. "Are you sure Mom wanted me to have her?"

"Yeah, she was very specific."

"Great. Testing me right to the end, I see..."

"Come on, Hunter, it's over, okay? Mom's gone."

He was right and I needed to start reining in my bitterness. "So what's up for tomorrow?"

"The wake at four."

"Open casket?"

"Yes."

"I'll pass."

"Hunter! You have to -"

"Sam, I don't have to do anything, okay? Number one, unless Mom changed drastically, she was very private and she would have hated an open casket and, two, I choose not to remember our mother the way she looks lying dead in a box. And I will not accept people's condolences to me when obviously everyone in this town knows we hadn't spoken in nearly half my life and they know saying 'I'm sorry' to me are just empty words." It had come out sounding a little more defensive than I had intended.

"Okay," he backed down. "Got it."

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Um...listen...it's been a long day and I'm a little testy. Maybe after a good night's sleep..."

"Yeah. I understand, Hunter, really. Get some sleep. You want to come over for coffee in the morning?"

"Let me call you. My body clock is still on a different time zone, I might sleep past coffee time."

"Okay. Call me when you get up?"

"Sure. Sounds like a plan."

"Also, just so you know, Dane's really on the warpath about this house thing, so be prepared for anything. He's pretty tanked up right now. Just don't be surprised if he shows up for a show down."

"Tonight? He shows up tonight, he might just be looking down the barrel of my Smith & Wesson."

"You brought your gun here?"

"No," I snickered, "but Dane doesn't have to know that."

Laughing with me, Sam said, "You're still incorrigible, aren't you?"

"Yep. Goodnight, Sam."

"Goodnight, Hunter. See you tomorrow."

We hung up and I finished my beer. I had not realized it but when I sat down on the couch, Orion had jumped up and lay down next to me, washing. She was actually purring. I took the chance and cautiously scratched her head, then under her chin. She stood up and rubbed up against me. "Don't think you're fooling me for a second. I know you, remember? You'll wait until I think you're asleep from my petting you and then you'll channel the face hugger from 'Alien.' Well, I'm not falling for it." She began to head butt my arm, purring louder. I was tempted but I didn't

allow her to entrap me.

Taking my empty bottle to the kitchen, I headed upstairs for a shower before I turned in for the night.

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7.

I walked downstairs, very refreshed after my shower, toweling my hair dry and I went to the fridge, taking out a beer, removing the cap. I wanted one more to relax before I tried to get some sleep. I had just taken a swig of the ice cold beverage when I heard a knock on the door. I looked at the clock. One twenty. I started to burn. It could only be Dane, having had a little too much to drink at Sam's and now probably had the liquid courage to confront me on this house issue. Nothing like the little fucker not wasting any time.

I unlocked the door and swung it open, ready to blast my baby brother when, instead of his beady glare and sniveling little pinched up face, I saw the emerald eyes and flawlessly beautiful smile of the woman who had occupied nearly all of my thoughts and a few mini fantasies for the last ninety minutes. "Hi," I managed to get out, surprised and pleased to see her.

"Hi," she responded, not dropping her gaze, searching my eyes in a silent interrogation. I leaned against the door, very content to just stare back at her. She smiled, indulgently. "So...before I go any further and boldly invite myself in, I just need to know one thing. Am I wrong?"

I knew she was asking if she had assumed correctly that I was a lesbian, too. I blinked at her, lazily, just drinking her in. "No. You are definitely not wrong." Her grin widened and I know mine did, also. I stepped back and gestured her inside. "Please come in."

"Why, I'd love to."

She passed me and I looked outside before closing the door, locking it again. I did not see a car other than my rental parked anywhere near the house. "How did you get here?"

"Since I expected to get pretty buzzed tonight, I arranged not to drive."

"Who dropped you off? Don't tell me Lesley..."

"Oh, hell, no. I took a cab."

That stopped me. "There are cabs in Otter Falls? Since when?"

She laughed, a sound that delightfully caressed my ears. "Oh, since about the same time we got indoor plumbing and moonshine became illegal."

Smart ass. "Moonshine is illegal? Well, that does it, I can't stay here." I couldn't stop the smirk that had a mind of its own every time I looked at her. "Would you like a beer?"

"Hmmm..." Alcohol-fueled indecision. "Okay, maybe one." She followed me into the kitchen.

"Are you sure?" I opened the Guinness for her and handed her the bottle. "I wouldn't want to be accused of getting you drunk and taking advantage of you."

She stopped drinking mid-sip, grinning, with the bottle still at her lips. "Were you planning on taking advantage of me?"

I studied her, excited by and at ease with her presence. "That *is* why you're here, isn't it?" This was one of the quickest and smoothest seductions I had ever been involved in. The scenario was practically writing itself.

She continued with her initial sip. "God, I hate being so transparent." She looked around. "This place looks exactly the same as it did the last time I was here, when I was, what, fourteen?"

"Let's not talk about when you were that age." I approached her as I couldn't resist her any longer and stood mere inches away from her, looking down into her lovely, revealing eyes.

"Why? Make you feel kind of dirty, does it?" She exhaled, her voice low and breathy, as she returned my gaze of longing. I moved closer as she stepped backward until her back met the refrigerator. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

"And if our roles were reversed and I said that to you, what would you have said to me?" I asked, closing in on her.

"I would have said that I've been waiting eighteen years for this kiss. I think that's long enough."

"I've been waiting almost two hours for this kiss. That's a record for me." Our lips were nearly touching.

"Dawggie," she whispered, breathlessly.

"Woof," I answered, hoarsely. And then I was kissing her. And she was kissing me. We were both still holding onto our bottles, my free hand in my pocket, hers bracing herself against the fridge, me leaning into her as we deepened the kiss, my body tingling from the contact. It felt oddly familiar and thrillingly new. As the kiss continued, I placed my beer on the counter and easily removed hers from her hand and let it join mine. Arms encircling shoulders and waists, bringing us tight against each other, her curves fitting very nicely into mine, she made me feel as though I'd always belonged right there, as if I'd come home.

We continued to kiss, content with exploring each other's mouths before we made the decision to move on to something more intimate. Her lips grinding passionately against mine told me that her want was as limitless as mine was right now. My profound desire for her driving me to

distraction, I found myself getting innately aggressive and we were both panting when I finally broke what felt like an infinite kiss and rested my forehead against hers.

"You need to tell me right now if you don't want to go any further," I told her, feeling like I was ready to hyperventilate. I was threading my fingers through her soft hair while her hands were running up and down my back. My body was humming with arousal.

She nodded. "Yeah." She drew a deep breath. "That was pretty intense...and everything I'd hoped it would be. But I guess it would be irresponsible of me if I didn't ask you if you really are a hound dog or just joking about that...because...I didn't bring any protection."

I gently lifted her chin and she slowly blinked up at me. "I've had my days, believe me. But my last, uh, encounter was maybe six months ago with a woman whose history I know very well. My last physical was six weeks ago and I tested negative for anything that should cause concern, should we, you know, make it upstairs..." She absorbed this information with a relieved smile. "You?"

She was hesitant. Uh oh. She lowered her eyes to the floor and then said, quietly, "I don't have any diseases but I do have a sort of girlfriend."

I know she felt me stiffen in her arms and reflex made me want to take a step back but she obviously expected it and her arms secured me in place. "A 'sort of' girlfriend? Define a 'sort of' girlfriend."

"She's someone I've been seeing for four years. It's difficult to explain."

"Try." I slowly lifted her chin again, forcing her to look at me.

"She lives in New Jersey. We get together maybe once a month or so. It's...it's basically more of being in a routine than a relationship. We've talked about calling it quits a couple times but because it's just so convenient for both of us and neither one of us want to re-enter the meat market of dating again, we just haven't. It's really turned into more like occasionally sleeping with a good friend."

Okay. That could qualify as a 'sort of' girlfriend. Was she telling the truth? I suppose if she'd wanted to hide the fact that she wasn't available, she would not have brought it up at all. And what did I care? I was only going to be here as long as it took to get the house on the market. Although, if anything could change my mind about hanging around a little longer, it would be the promise of being able hold this woman in my arms as often as possible. "So why isn't your 'sort of' girlfriend here tonight to celebrate the big three-oh with you?"

"Her sister, who lives in Texas, had a baby. She's out there, helping out for a week."

"Ah." My hand slid to the back of her neck and I brought our lips together again for a lasting, torrid kiss that caused us both to moan. I pushed my knee forward and fit my thigh snug between her legs, an action that caused her to temporarily break our kiss and gasp. When her lips hungrily

latched back onto mine, she started to gyrate slightly against me and it drove me to need more and I wasn't sure I could wait until we got upstairs.

I cupped her ass as she grasped my shoulders and I lifted her so that she was able to wrap her legs around my waist, swinging her around and seating her on the kitchen counter, never breaking contact. I moved my fingers between us, brushing them over her breast, feeling her hardened nipple through the fabric of her shirt, lightly rubbing the tip with the palm of my hand. I was about to start unbuttoning her blouse when a voice behind us broke the spell.

"Well, well, well...isn't this special..." I turned quickly to see Dane, barely able to stand, holding himself up against the doorway.

Lisa, startled, tried to retreat immediately by unhooking her legs and I felt her hand on my chest in a motion that was keeping me at bay. I knew it was the embarrassment of getting caught in such an intimate moment more than it was shame at doing what we were doing. Before I released her, I planted a brief, reassuring kiss on her forehead which she didn't resist.

"What are you doing here, Dane?"

"Catching you with your hands in the cookie jar, or almost in the cookie jar, so it would seem." He was unable to stand up straight and slurring his words heavily. He tried to unsuccessfully focus on Lisa. "Well, hello there, Counselor Cookie."

"Did you drive here?" I stepped away from Lisa and rested my fists on my hips. Talk about ruining a moment.

"No, my wife's in the car, waiting for me. Why? Don't tell me you're concerned."

"About you? No. But I would be concerned about whoever was sharing the road with you."

"What would you have done? Taken my keys and driven me home?"

"No, I would have waited until you got in your car and called the police to report a drunk driver."

"Yeah, you would, too, you bitch."

"Listen, you little prick, this is my house now. You have no right to use your key just to walk in whenever you feel like it. I'm advising you right now that you are trespassing. If you do this again, I will have you arrested."

"You don't deserve this house!"

"I didn't ask for this house!" I shot back at him. "And this isn't the time to discuss this. Now get your squatty little ass out of here before I really do call the police."

"And you can get back to what you were doing, you degenerate. This what living in California

did to you or is this why Mom kicked you out all those years ago?"

"Dane, I am only going to ask you one more time to leave and then I am going to physically throw you out. And you know I can still do it." My tone was even but there was no mistaking my intent.

He put up a hand in surrender. "Alright, alright, okay. I'm going." He turned around, stumbled and nearly fell over before regaining his balance. He stuck his index finger in the air. "But this is not over, Hunter...or maybe I should start calling you Cunter."

That was it. In three steps I had my hand on the back of his neck and helped him along to the door, opening it with my free hand. "Don't ever come here again without a direct invitation, you sad, pathetic little freak." I grabbed his collar and his belt, lifting up, hopefully giving him the wedgie from hell, and by the squeaky voice he was trying to protest in, I think I succeeded, and I thrust him outside. Arms flailing, he propelled forward and in three giant steps, his legs crumpled underneath him and he did a face plant on the front lawn.

"Dane!" his wife yelled, as she exited the car. She glanced up at me and I thought she might start screaming at me until she started pounding him with her fist. "I told you not to come here, you dumb son of a bitch! I knew you'd make a damned fool of yourself!"

Maybe after tonight, my little brother would be looking at divorce number three.

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8.

I shut the door again, sensing Lisa in the room, half-expecting her to have called a cab to take her home. When I turned to face her, she was standing in the archway. "I apologize for that." I could still feel the ghost of her in my arms, still feel her lips on mine and I very much wanted it again.

"Look, don't apologize for Dane. He was an asshole in school and he's just escalated as he's gotten older. You're not responsible for his behavior so you shouldn't apologize for it."

"Okay, then, I apologize for what he interrupted," I offered, sincerely.

That brought a fond smile to her face and she glanced down, demurely, before capturing my eyes again with hers. "Me, too." She slowly walked toward me. "Is this going to cause a problem for you? I take it no one knows you're a lesbian."

"To my knowledge, no one *here* knows I'm a lesbian - except you - but everyone where I live knows that I am. I'm very much out. And while we're on that subject, let me just say that I find it admirable that you are so out here. That takes guts."

"Not so much guts anymore as patience. It was difficult, at first, but now it's a non-issue."

"Not for your family, obviously."

"They love me very much but they feel my orientation is a private matter and nobody's business whereas I feel it is as much who I am as being right-handed is so there's no reason to hide it."

"Your parents' attitude of not wanting you to be so open I can understand, for this area, how they somehow think it reflects on them. I don't agree with it but I understand it. But what is up with your sister's attitude?" I know my tone bordered on offended.

She took a step closer and reached over, running her fingers back and forth over the hem of my t-shirt. "She married two very controlling men. Both very opinionated and their thoughts became her thoughts or else. You know what I mean?"

"Let me guess...they are also the type that publicly condemn homosexuality but privately get off watching girl on girl porn."

"You've got it. So my sister, the chameleon, says whatever she feels will make her husband proud of her and whatever ridiculous thought of the day he has, she adopts that viewpoint as her own."

"That surprises me. Lesley always seemed so strong in high school." I really didn't want to be talking about Lesley. I took Lisa's hand and held it as I closed the space between us.

"Yeah, well, she fell into that trap my parents fed her that her life wouldn't be complete without a husband and she believed it. Or, at least wanted to." Her other hand snaked around my waist.

"What caused you to avoid that trap?"

She stood on her tip toes, her lips nearly touching mine. "You did."

"Me?" I closed my eyes, putting my arms around her, holding her to me. As though Dane had never interrupted us, I almost instantly returned to my advanced state of arousal.

"Yes, you. You were always it for me, from the moment I could feel desire for someone. I never wanted to be with anyone but you. That's when I knew no man could ever generate in me the longing I felt for you."

"You were fourteen when I left." I was almost panting, my impulse to make love to her was so clear and strong.

"Yes. Fourteen," she lovingly kissed my chin, "and very much aware of my sexuality." She kissed my cheek, lingeringly. "You always had such a fire inside you, an energy and a spirit that was so honest and different from everyone else around here. You were the most subtly stunning girl in school, a diamond in the rough, and I knew it way back then and I'm very glad to see that I was right." She kissed the tip of my nose. "And when you left, I was devastated." She kissed my other cheek. "When you came back for your uncle's funeral, I skipped all my classes to get here,

I was so obsessed with seeing you. But you were only here for one day and I missed you. And -"

I silenced her with a kiss so blazing, the heat alone should have melted us both. I was overwhelmed by Lisa's devoted feelings toward me, staggered by the passion she was showing me and a little stunned at the powerful emotions she was bringing out in me. It was as though I had always wanted her as much as she obviously always wanted me.

The sensation of her lips on mine was, at once, liberating and conquering. I didn't want it to end yet wanted to move on to whatever would put out this raging inferno in my center. We stood there and worked that one continuous kiss, grinding into each other, until I could stand it no more.

"Lisa, do you want to take this upstairs?" My voice was husky with want.

"No," came the throaty response, "I want you to take me right here."

"Oh, Jesus." My head fell back as just the idea of that galvanized me.

"But...upstairs would work, too..."

I looked down into quietly excited green eyes and a confident, sensual smile that inflamed my own desires to an even more heightened level. "You are still a brat, you know that?"

"So I hear."

I curled my fingers around hers and led her around the house as I made sure all the lights were off and everything was locked. Pulling her upstairs, my heart was pounding so hard, I thought it might burst before I got her to the bedroom. I guess things had finally come full circle. She had waited all those years for me and now I could barely wait minutes for her.

As she stood in front of me in the dark bedroom, I slowly backed her up to the bed, using only my body. When her legs collided with the low side frame, she grabbed two fistfuls of my shirt and pulled me down with her as she lost her balance. Laughing, we playfully wrestled for a minute while maneuvering our bodies so that we both fit on the bed. She looked up at me reverently as my face hovered over hers. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

"Mmmmm. Thank you. But it's not like you couldn't give whiplash to a monk, you know." Good lord, she was gorgeous, just a perfect medley of, well, *everything*. And there was a sweetness to her sensuality which was an extraordinary combination that definitely worked in her favor.

She chuckled and then became serious again. "I can't believe I'm finally here with you."

"If it makes you feel any better, I can't believe I am here with you, either." I never would have predicted that I would even run into my high school best friend's pesky little sister, much less, end up in bed with her. And feel like I was always meant to be there, to boot. Stretched out on top of her, fully clothed, was beginning to feel like torture.

"When Lesley walked over to the table tonight, with you in tow, I thought I was going to faint. I really didn't think you'd come back for your mother's services."

"Do you always talk this much when you're about to have the hell fucked out of you?"

This made her really laugh. "First, I don't think that's possible and second, my, you certainly have an ego, don't you?"

"You don't think I can fuck the hell out of you?"

"No." She put on a southern belle accent and batted her eyes. "But I'd be much obliged if you'd try."

I leaned down and kissed her tenderly, an action much different from what we had already experienced with each other. Her tongue begged entry to my mouth and I did not deny her. After a few delicious minutes of that, I lifted my head and was about to roll off her. "Why don't you get undressed?" I suggested, my inner voyeur screaming to get out.

And then, in an impossibly sexy voice, she said, "Why don't you undress me?"

Oh, fuck. When did she get to be so hot? Of course. Why wouldn't I want to undress her? I positioned myself so that I could get the maximum effect. Methodically, I unbuttoned her blouse and opened it to find a very full bra that unhooked in the front. I loved those things, so much less fumbling. I'd spent many a morning apologizing for the condition of a bra I'd ended up ripping off my bed partner's body because it was frustratingly impeding the flow of the foreplay.

I ran both hands over the cups of the garment and then down over her nicely defined abs and tight stomach. I didn't need to ask her if she exercised regularly, it was obvious. Unbuttoning her jeans, she slightly lifted her behind off the bed as I slid them off, dropping them on the floor and then I returned my attention to the partially-clothed woman displayed before me.

She watched my eyes the entire time, taking great pleasure in the way I took in every curve, every inch of her exposed body. Not being able to wait until she was completely naked, I bent down, beginning at the low cut waistband of her panties and kissed her warm skin upward until I reached that front clasp. With little effort, it was unhooked and I raised up on my arms so that I could see her. I'm not normally a breast snob...big, small, in between...to me, they are all perfect as long as I can hold them and put my mouth on them but hers were downright exquisite. "Jesus, Lisa..." I must have sounded awestruck. Her body was amazing.

"I work out," she admitted, shyly.

"So I see." I reached down and pulled her to me by her open blouse, removing that and her bra and then laid her back down. I ran my hand over her panties to find her soaking wet. "These have to come off," I announced, unnecessarily, as I peeled them off. Scanning her supine form in all its glory, I didn't know where to start.

Running my hand up her leg, over her thigh and her trimmed, dark blonde mound, she shivered as I drew my fingers over her abdomen and began circling her breasts. I crawled over her and buried my face into the hollow of her neck and slowly, deliberately, kissed down to her right nipple, sealing my lips around it. She put her hands into my hair as her breathing hitched and increased when my fingers feathered their way south, finding their warm, wet goal and stroked. When I switched to her other breast, I must have gone off target because within seconds her hand was curling around my wrist, repositioning my fingers. Knowing she was getting close, I carefully inched up, trying not to lose momentum or move my hand. I wanted to watch her come, had to see her expression when she spilled over, needed to know how she reacted to my touch.

Her eyes locked with mine and she grabbed my wrist again, ensuring I wouldn't lose her as she was so near the precipice. She was moving against me, fully participating, when her grip tightened and I heard her hold her breath for what seemed like a dangerous period of time and then she exploded with a moan that jolted through me like a current of electricity.

Before she completely got her breath back, she grabbed my face with both hands and pulled it toward hers, kissing me with a voracity that matched her climax. Still lightly stroking her, I moved my fingers lower, circling her opening, which elicited another groan. She spread her legs and I easily entered her, provoking a very pleasurable gasp. For the next fifteen minutes, we kissed feverishly while I pumped my fingers into her and she thrust against my stroke, driving me deeper.

She broke our kiss long enough to tell me she felt like she was almost there. I eased my fingers back, curling them up, feeling that spot I knew would push her over and then I continued my rhythm. In less than a minute, she was holding onto me, digging her short nails into my shoulders, panting heavily in my ear until she, once again, inhaled until she released, bucking and arching, saying my name over and over in a helplessly feral growl. I held her until her body settled in its reaction to the rather robust orgasm. I kept my stilled fingers inside her while she breathed heavily into my neck.

"Jesus, Hunter...where did you learn to do *that*?"

"Do what?"

"*That*...what you just did. I've never felt...*that*...before."

I raised my head and studied her expression of wonder with astonishment. "You've never had a vaginal orgasm before?"

She blinked at me and shook her head negatively. "No. I couldn't even believe when I blurted out to you that I was close. But at least now I know what all the fuss is about."

I grinned, feeling pretty damned proud of myself. "That was really your first?"

"Yes. And hopefully not my last."

"It won't be if I have anything to say about it." I kissed her forehead. What the hell had her 'sort of' girlfriend been doing in bed with her for the past four years?

"Are you eventually going to take off your clothes?" Her smile was contagious.

"Eventually. Just not yet." I winked at her, kissed her and slid down her body.

"Oh my fucking God," she half-laughed, half-wailed. "I don't know if my nether regions can take this..."

"Only one way to find out," I told her as I parted her, cleaning up the residuals of my earlier handiwork. She tasted uniquely amazing and I immediately knew I was never going to get enough of this. I stayed nuzzled in my furry little nook for another extensive orgasm until she begged me to stop. Slithering back up her magnificently fit body, I collapsed to the left of her, pulling her over on top of me.

"You're going to have to give me a minute here," she grinned.

"Take all the time you need," I told her, feeling very content, a little cocky and suddenly very tired.

"Okay, I'll just lay here like this then," she kidded.

"Fine with me," I yawned.

"You're yawning?" She pretended to be insulted. "Do I bore you?"

I smirked at her. "You wore me out."

"I wore *you* out?" That made her laugh and she rested her head on my chest, squeezing me tightly, just basking in the afterglow.

And that's the last thing I remember until morning.

\*\*\*\*\*

9.

I awoke, sensing I was not alone, but too fuzzy to connect the dots right away. Then, as the recollection of last night filtered into my jet-lagged brain, I slowly opened my eyes to see a blonde head on my shoulder and her warm, naked body snuggled against me. I smiled as the vividness of making sweet love to this special woman filled me and I squeezed her shoulder with more affection than I thought I had in me.

"You snore." Her sleep soaked voice vibrated against my breastbone.

"You drool," I countered, seeing a small puddle on my chest by her mouth.

"Well, that's attractive," she mumbled. "Thanks for pointing that out, Ms Buzzsaw."

I chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "Did I keep you awake?"

She lifted her face to look at me, grinning impishly. "Not from snoring."

Kissing her forehead, I said, "Did I ravish you in my sleep?"

"Mmmm, no, you didn't need to. The memory and the effects of what you did before you fell asleep was enough to keep me awake."

"You sound awfully sleepy for someone who got no sleep."

"Exhaustion tagged me about two hours ago. Despite your snoring." She kissed my chin and rested her head back over my right breast.

"Was it that bad?"

"No...it was kind of cute, actually." I could hear the grin in her voice as the hand under my t-shirt lazily brushed back and forth over my nipple. As tired as I still was, she was starting to fire me up. "You never even got undressed."

"I was waiting for you to undress me," I whispered into her hair. She pinched my nipple hard. "Ow! What was that for?" I laughed, my hand covering hers.

"Undress you? Do you realize how out you were? I'm not into necrophilia, I like my lover to be conscious, thank you."

Lover. I liked the sound of that word connected with her. "Sorry I crashed on you."

"It's okay. I could see last night at the bar that you were tired. I was being very selfish, I know." She raised up on her elbow, looking at me again. "But I wanted to give myself the ultimate birthday present. I only got half my wish, though."

"What was the other half?"

"To make you feel as good as you made me feel."

I know I should have got up and brushed my teeth before I kissed her again but I couldn't resist. And she did not seem to mind as she climbed on me, stretching herself out over me, deepening the gesture, which was beginning to liquefy my lower body. She extricated her lips from mine

and sat up, straddling my hips, giving me another opportunity to feast my eyes on her magnificent body. Feeling her wetness on my lower belly made me want to flip her over and fuck her senseless. Reaching up, I cupped her breasts and then drew my hands down her sides until they rested on her thighs.

She slowly lifted my t-shirt, revealing a little bit of skin at a time, until she got it over my head and off my arms, tossing it over her shoulder onto the floor. Her eyes and hands roamed over my chest in appreciative investigation and she slowly, softly, touched my breasts and then my nipples, which couldn't have gotten any harder if they had been encased in cement. She had this way of looking at me that took my breath away. "Very nice," she announced after several minutes of exploration. "Very, very nice."

"Glad you approve," I commented, wondering what she was going to do next. I didn't have to wait long. She swung her leg off me and removed my boxer shorts, dropping them on top of my t-shirt and then laid down on her left side, facing me. She once again scanned my nakedness, paying particular attention to the parts she hadn't seen before. Leaning over, she kissed me passionately and then trailed more kisses down the length of my torso until she got to the volcano that was once my center. She was going for the gold her first shot. I loved being stroked and I loved to be entered and driven to orgasm but nothing got me off more fully and completely than a well-placed, skilled tongue.

"Mmmmm...I feel like I should say 'grace'." And then, she nuzzled me before settling in with her torturously sweet assault, tempering her pace.

I shut my eyes, thoroughly enjoying her catering to my one specific need at the moment, listening to and feeling her ministrations as she continued her 'mmmmms.' I maneuvered a pillow under my ass, giving her better access and she wrapped her arms around my thighs, never missing a beat. I felt the sensation start to leisurely build and I involuntarily began to rock against her mouth. I tried to keep my movement to a minimum because she was exactly where I needed her to be and I didn't want her to lose her place.

She stimulated me right to the verge and then when I crested, she drew the act out, prolonging my climax, causing me to come twice in a row. Then, with her mouth still on me, she pushed deep into me with two fingers, just their presence provoking a third orgasm from me almost instantly. I was stunned. I had never been multi-orgasmic before. Interesting. We had both given each other something new.

"Jesus, you're good at this." It was a thought that had been said out loud.

I felt her smile against me and when her tongue started moving again, I had to stop her as I was now a tad tender. And I was impressed that she had been down there for as long as she had and never seemed to come up for air...not that I was really paying attention until now. "So, can you teach me how to breathe through my ears like that?" I asked, causing her to laugh and rest her head on my thigh.

"Sure. As soon as you teach me this little trick." She wiggled her fingers before she slowly

withdrew them and crept up my body, roosting on top of me, tracing my lips with the fingers that had just been inside me. "Don't put those in my mouth," I warned her, good-naturedly.

She immediately took that as a challenge and attempted to force them past my clenched teeth. I grabbed her hand and moved it away but she was a strong little shit and she swung them back to my mouth. "You don't want to taste yourself?"

"Not particularly."

She was coltish and persistent, giggling while we playfully scuffled. I finally rolled her over, trapping her beneath me and I pushed her fingers into her own mouth, where she slowly, deliberately fellated them. "Mmmm. Lisa like."

I found her actions erotic and her friskiness endearing and I could not stop myself from kissing her. She poked her tongue in, making sure it hit every section of my mouth until I captured it and lightly sucked on it.

Separating her face from mine, she said, "Guess you got to taste yourself anyway."

She was, indeed, a brat. I gave her a few quick pecks as I held her. "Do you have to be at work or anything?"

"No. I wasn't sure how I would be feeling the morning after my birthday, so I arranged to be out of the office."

"So, you don't have to be anywhere at any specific time?"

"My parents wanted me to come over for lunch but I can blow them off."

"Jesus, don't tell your mother you were with me all night. She'll ground you until your AARP kicks in." She gave me a half-hearted swat. "It's true. She finds out you've been with me, she'll probably blame me for your being gay."

"Well, it kind of is your fault," she teased. She brought her lips to mine for another kiss. "If you hadn't been so damned beautiful and sexy and strong and commanding..."

"I'd say flattery will get you everywhere but that's a cliché and I avoid clichés like the plague," I joked, making her chuckle again. I loved the way her nose crinkled when she laughed or smiled really wide. "Tell you what...I *really* like cuddling with you so why don't we try to get a couple more hours sleep and decide on the rest of our day from there?"

"God, I would love that," she admitted, honestly. We snuggled in, getting comfortable, me on my back and Lisa burrowed into my side with an arm around my waist and a leg hooked over mine. "Hunter?"

"Yes?"

"Welcome home."

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Two things hit me immediately when I woke up - the phone was ringing and I was alone in bed. The phone could wait.

I sat up, searching the room for Lisa, hoping she had not called a cab and gone home. That thought instantly made me miss her. I couldn't imagine her leaving without waking me, though, and I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and tried to get my bearings.

Looking at the clock, I groaned, knowing that half the day was gone already and I still needed to make an appearance at Sam's at some point. Better I go there than he show up here. One brother catching me with my pants practically down before I had a chance to come out to them was bad enough. I wanted to tell Sam myself and not have the news come from the warped perspective of Dane.

Stretching as I got out of bed, I put on the same clothes I'd worn after my shower the night before. It was then I noticed that Lisa's clothes were still on the floor, which easily coaxed a very warm smile out of me. She was somewhere in this house...naked.

My first order of business, though, had to be relief for my bladder.

On my way back from the bathroom, I passed my old room and saw that the door was half open and I knew I had closed it the night before. Peeking in, I spotted Lisa, leaning close to the vanity, reading one of the newspaper clippings from so long ago. And she was wearing my old bathrobe, which was very big on her. It looked adorable.

"Finding anything interesting?" I knew she knew I was up because you could hear that toilet flush three states away.

Not turning to me, she addressed my reflection in the mirror. "I remember these basketball games like they were yesterday. You took us to the sectionals and then the championships." She pivoted and walked over to me. "I went to every one of your games."

I stopped and thought about that. "Oh my god...you did, didn't you?" I took her face in my hands and kissed her tenderly, then wrapped my arms around her. "And I was so rotten to you sometimes. How could you have been so loyal?"

"You weren't really rotten...per se...you were just obviously annoyed. Come on, I *was* a little pest," she laughed.

"You had your moments," I agreed. "I always thought you shadowed us all the time because you wanted to be like your sister or just didn't want to be left out."

"Me? Want to be like Lesley? Uh...no." She shook her head, emphatically. "I never wanted to be like Lesley."

Taking her hand in mine, I led her downstairs to the kitchen. As she filled the automatic coffee maker with water, I went in search of some coffee. Swinging open one cupboard door, instead of what I was looking for, I found three cans of cat food which reminded me that I needed to feed Orion. Plucking out a can, I held it in my hand while still perusing for coffee.

Feeling the cat food container being removed from my grasp, I then heard, "Mmmmm, liver, bacon and cheese bits...never had this particular brew but as long as it has caffeine..."

"Very funny. It's for Orion."

"That monster is still alive?" There was a tone of incredulity to her voice.

As if on cue, Orion slinked into the kitchen, meowing, honing in on my bare leg and making a beeline for it. I froze and prepared for the assault of teeth and claws but it never came. Instead, she circled my calf, rubbing up against me and purring loudly. "She hasn't attacked me yet. Either she's changed or she's saving it up." I then remembered that my mother used to keep her coffee in the freezer. And that's where I found it. "Aha!"

Lisa made coffee while I fed the cat and then returned to the kitchen to accept a hot mug and a quick kiss before we sat down at the table, opposite each other. "So, Hunter, do you think Dane is going to cause trouble for you?"

"In general or because of last night?"

"Both I guess." She looked at me, resting her chin on her palm.

I had the urge to grab her and take her right back upstairs but I reluctantly behaved myself. "I think he will give me trouble in general. I think he's waited the last sixteen years for this. And I think he thinks last night will give him a little more ammunition. But I think Sam might be the only one he will tell - and I hope to get to Sam first - because the last thing he is going to want people to know is that he has a lesbian sister; especially when he's upping his political stakes by running for congress."

"Oh, that's right," she agreed, in sudden realization. "Actually...you kind of have him over a barrel, don't you? You could publicly come out to, say, the local paper and really bury him."

"And don't think it isn't tempting. I guess I'll wait and see just how dirty he wants to fight."

"Oh, speaking of Sam, he left a message on the machine, wondering if you were up yet."

"Okay. I was wondering who called."

We sat there and chatted through another cup of coffee and then went back upstairs to shower,

something we did together, steaming up the bathroom from more than just hot water. I couldn't get enough of her. I couldn't get enough of touching her, of looking at her and especially not of hearing her voice moaning my name in ecstasy.

When we were done, we dressed and discussed what we were both going to do that afternoon. Lisa had decided that she would meet her parents for a late lunch after all. She would have preferred to spend the day with me, as I would with her, but I needed to get some business taken care of and she wanted to pick up her dogs from 'grandma and grandpa's'. They had been at her parents' house for a week while she had new tile installed in her kitchen.

She drove my car to the rental office and I followed her in my nephew's Jeep, loving the way the rugged vehicle felt. It was a five-speed manual transmission and the stick shift moved easily from gear to gear. I missed driving a stick. At home in L.A., with the constant stop and go of 'rush hour' traffic, it was easier on the car (and my temper) to have an automatic but I preferred this kind of driving any day.

As it was unusually warm for October, I removed the ragtop and let the sun beat down on me the seven miles from my mother's house to the south end of town. After returning the vehicle and getting that squared away, I drove Lisa to her house so that she could change her clothes. She didn't want to show up at her parents' house wearing the same outfit she had on last night. She invited me in but I politely declined. I couldn't trust myself to keep my hands off her and then neither of us would accomplish anything. Well...anything *productive*, that is.

She leaned over and kissed me, not caring if her neighbors were looking, and I watched her walk to her front door, a fond smile taking over my face. She turned and gave me a little wave before disappearing inside and I drove away, grinning like a fool, feeling like a schoolgirl in love.

Welcome home, indeed.

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10.

Arriving at Sam's, I pulled into the driveway behind what I assumed was his car. I knew it wasn't Dane's, or at least the car he had been a passenger in last night. I wondered if he had already outed me to Sam, which was why I decided to just show up as opposed to call. I didn't want to get into the subject of my orientation over the phone. Mom's wake didn't start until four o'clock, so we had a couple hours to get things out in the open.

Knocking on the frame to the left of the screen door, I waited this time instead of just walking in. Last night was different, he had obviously been expecting guests and with the chatter in the living room, he would not have heard me knock. I heard someone descending the steps and then Trina was at the door, pushing it open.

"For heaven's sake, Hunter, you don't have to knock, you're family." She gave me a playful swat on the shoulder as I passed her. "Sleep off your jet lag, did you?" she asked as she followed me

upstairs to the kitchen. I thought I caught a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

"Sort of," I responded, noncommittally. "That always takes a few days."

"Especially if you've been up all night?" she asked, with a raised eyebrow and amused expression. She held out a mug. "Coffee?"

Oh boy. They knew. "Sure. Got anything to put in it?"

"Baileys?"

I seriously thought about it and then I shook my head. "Black is fine. So when did he call you?"

She filled the mug and handed it to me. "About two hours ago. And, oh, the names he was calling you..."

I took a sip, looking at her over the rim of the cup. She didn't appear to be put off in the least. "I'm actually surprised he can speak at all, the condition he was in last night."

"Unfortunately, that's normal for him when he is at any event where there is alcohol of any kind. He's working on his fourth DUI, which is why Emma drives after parties or functions now."

"Lovely. And the town keeps voting him into office? How can he keep that kind of behavior quiet? A politician's life is an open book and there's always somebody who can't be bought to shut up. I don't care what kind of lawyer he has."

"Yep. But, don't worry, the longer he is in office, the more enemies he's making. If he gets voted into congress, I'll be surprised. And...speaking of lawyers..." There was that look of amusement again.

"What exactly did he tell you?"

"He told Sam, who told me, that he caught you having sex with Lisa Riordan in the kitchen."

"We weren't having sex." I took another sip of coffee as she folded her arms and waited patiently for the rest. "We were making out. We had sex later."

She nodded and shook her head, laughing. "Well, I have to tell you, Hunter, you've got excellent taste. Lisa Riordan is very well-respected around here. She's gone after some pretty big businesses for their violations of state eco-laws and won. Not to mention she's classy and quite beautiful."

"That she is." I studied my sister-in-law. "You don't seem surprised or shocked."

"Just because we live in East Bumfuck doesn't mean we automatically have to think and act like rubes, you know. We *do* have connection to the outside world," she mildly reprimanded. "Sam

and I guessed you were probably gay a while ago."

"You did?" Why is it when we make the decision to finally come out to family and loved ones we're stunned that no one is surprised.

"Well, yeah. Come on, Hunter...you were the ultimate jock in high school, you told Sam all those boys you allegedly dated were really just buddies, that you nearly kicked Phil Khaury's ass for telling people that he did something with you he didn't and so that Sam wouldn't go kick his ass -"

"Sam? Kick somebody's ass?" I smirked just at the visual I was getting. Phil would have annihilated Sam and then I would have had to beat the ever-loving shit out of Phil, which would have humiliated my older brother. And Phil. But I didn't care about Phil's reputation.

"He was mad enough to," she said, almost defensively. "Anyway, you're thirty-four years old, you're not married, never have been, never even come close, never talked about a boyfriend, not even dating anybody and...shit, Hunter, you're gorgeous, you're obviously in great shape and you're not too intolerable to be around," she added with a smile. "I agree, it would take a very confident, strong man to be with you but you can't tell me out where you live that you haven't met at least a few. So, we just figured you were a lesbian and you'd tell us when you wanted us to know."

Wow. Why hadn't I thought that they would think of that? "Sam is okay with this?"

"Hunter, Sam loves you. He just wants you to be happy. He doesn't care who you sleep with, your sex life is none of our business. He - no, *we* - would just like you back in our lives on a regular basis."

I nodded, accepting that. "And you? What do you think about it?"

"Hell, I think it's hot. Not that I want to try it, myself, but you and Lisa Riordan? Very hot." The look on her face was actually making me blush. "You certainly didn't waste any time last night, did you?"

"She came after me." I supplied a little scenario of the evening before, right up until Dane's intrusion. "I called Pucinski's Safety and Security before I left the house. They're coming out to change the locks first thing in the afternoon." I was about to ask where Sam was when I heard a door open and close down the hall. He entered the kitchen, looking like he was freshly out of the shower.

"Well, well, well...if it isn't my sister, the stud," he commented, putting his arm around my shoulder. "The kitchen counter, huh? And with Lisa Riordan, no less."

"Oh, god..." My chin touched my chest. So much for privacy and discretion. My cheeks were burning. "I'm going to kill Dane."

"Stand in line," Sam chuckled. He took a bottle of water out of the fridge and opened it, taking a long swig. "So are you sure you're not going to come to Mom's wake?"

"No. But thanks for asking." I tried to make light of it. I loved how after he made his little comment, it was no big deal and he immediately moved on to something else.

"How'd the house look to you after all this time?"

"Smaller. It was weird. I can still feel her presence there, though." Suddenly I wished that Trina had added some Baileys Irish Cream to my coffee.

"I don't think she ever stopped loving you, Hunter."

"Well, she had a funny way of showing it."

"You know how she was. She got something in her head, her pride would never let her believe anything less, even if she knew she was wrong. Or, at least, admit her mistakes."

"I tried to see her when I was here for Uncle David's funeral. She had nine years to swallow her pride and at least talk to me. That's all I wanted, Sam, is just for her to talk to me. She made her point. I got it. She not only rubbed my nose in it, she stomped my head into the ground. I don't see where you can classify that as love," I said, getting angry all over again.

He nodded, acknowledging my frustration. "I can't explain it, Hunter. I just know she was never the same after you left."

"She kicked me out and shut me out of her life. I think that would change anyone with a conscience, Sam. How do you justify treating your child like they don't exist? Mom was supposed to be such a religious woman. Doesn't the bible teach about forgiveness? Hate the sin not the sinner and all that crap? I mean...did she ever even ask about me?"

"No. She didn't have to. I would always just happen to mention it any time you would send an email or you and I would talk on the phone. She would always pretend she wasn't listening but she never asked me to not tell her or to stop talking about you." He took another swallow of water. "So what was it that caused such a rift, anyway?"

I suppose now that they knew I was a lesbian, holding onto 'the secret' any longer didn't make any sense. I sighed and held my mug out to Trina. "Now you can put some Baileys in there." She took the mug and did as I requested. "You haven't guessed yet?"

"She knew you were gay?" That assumption came from Trina who handed the mug back to me.

I nodded. "Yeah. But not until she came home unexpectedly and caught me in bed with someone."

Sam nearly dropped his water bottle. "Mom caught you in the act?" He exchanged shocked

glances with Trina. "Oh my God...she...you...oh my God."

"Yeah. And it was right *in* the act, too." The memory of the act she caught me in and the look on her face, standing in my doorway, conjured up a plethora of emotions, all of which caused my face to flush again.

"Who did she catch you in bed with? Don't tell me Lisa Riordan."

"Lisa -? For god's sake, Sam, Lisa was only fourteen when I left! Jesus. Give me some credit here."

"Hey, it was just a wild guess!" He said, defensively. "You guys did hook up awfully fast last night. And finding you in bed with a fourteen-year-old girl could certainly be grounds for expulsion from the house."

"No, it wasn't Lisa Riordan. Although, Mom may have preferred it was Lisa."

"Who was it?"

I thought of not revealing the identity of my very first lover. I realized it was sixteen years later but I had held it all inside me for so long, protecting her, that not saying her name was second nature now. However, I knew she was most likely far, far away, the event long forgotten shortly after, when she moved on to her next conquest. Why was I sheltering her, anyway? She never took any responsibility for the incident or even tried to find out if I was okay. I know she had heard about my banishment, the whole town knew about it and yet she did nothing to try and make it right. I took a deep breath. "It was Jennifer Visson." I waited for the reaction which was understandably delayed as the name registered and then the impact hit.

"*The minister's wife?!*" I heard Trina say, finally.

"That was the only Jennifer Visson I knew," I confirmed.

Sam was just as stunned. "You had sex with Mrs. Vixen? And Mom caught you?" I nodded to both questions. And then, ever the practical one, he said, "What the hell were you doing fucking her in the house? You deserved to get caught."

"Sam! I was eighteen, it was my first affair, I didn't care *where* we had sex as long *as* we had it. She kept assuring me we wouldn't get caught and I believed her."

"Is that why they left town so quickly?" Trina questioned. "Nobody bought the excuse that her parents were ill. She could have gone, tended to them and come back. Uprooting the whole family didn't make sense."

"I think she was afraid Mom would expose her and bring scandal to her family and the church. So they left before there was any backlash."

"But she was married...and had kids..." Trina commented.

"That doesn't matter. I know a lot of closeted gay people who are married and have families. I know a lot of married-with-kids gay people who have come out after they've discovered they don't have to live that lie anymore."

"Did Reverend Visson know about her, uh, inclinations?" Sam asked.

"She indicated that he did but never came right out and said it. Honestly? I didn't care. Her husband and her children were her concern, not mine," I shrugged. It was true. I was so hooked on her nothing mattered except when the next time we were going to get together would be.

There was dead silence. Sam and Trina exchanged disbelieving looks again. "The minister's wife. God, she was such a fox. Many a boy's unobtainable fantasy in the congregation, I'll tell you. Jesus, Hunter, when you do things, you do them big."

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Sam, Trina and I talked about the rift in more detail and it was honestly a relief to finally get it out. In fact, after the practical discussion that lasted for nearly an hour and made me almost feel like I cleansed my soul, I wished I had not kept it inside for so long. Maybe if I had outed myself sooner to my brother and others in Otter Falls, it would have forced my mother to face some truths and realities and not perpetuated the shadow of shame she created around the whole thing. Perhaps if they had found out the reason for my exile sixteen years ago, they may have reacted differently but their attitude now was only one of acceptance and sadness for the time lost and wasted.

The conversation then came back around to why would a woman, who seemed to hate me so much, leave me her house? It was certainly something I could not figure out with the limited information I had and the experience of knowing how my mother felt about me. Sam was also at a loss for coming up with an explanation that made sense. Yet according to her will, she was very specific about leaving me the house and anything that was in it (including Orion). And although Vermont had no state inheritance tax, her modest estate had provided to pay the federal inheritance tax in addition to a specific amount set aside to pay for an inspector to evaluate what kind of shape the structure was in as well as the electrical and plumbing systems. She even stipulated which real estate company she wished me to use should I decide to sell it as opposed to keep it.

Sam, as the executor of her will, explained to me that she chose that agency because the company had a good track record and they had a reputation for getting a good fair market value for the houses they sold. I laughed and shook my head. She was still trying to control me from the grave.

I asked Sam when the official reading of the will would be and he smiled and told me that only happened in the movies and on television, that there was no legal requirement to gather the family together to ceremoniously read a will. That made me feel better. The last thing I wanted

right now was to be shut into a room with Dane...where there were any witnesses.

He advised me that Mom's attorney's main responsibility was to ensure that the will was filed with the county clerk's office and that he was consulted before anything was done with my mother's equity. The will was probated so the lawyer would supervise any payment of mandatory taxes and bills, any collection of assets and any distribution of wealth. As for the infamous 'reading'? The 'reading' was done when looking over copies of the will which were mailed to all 'heirs.' In fact, Sam told me, I most likely had an official letter waiting for me when I got home.

"I'm taking an educated guess here and thinking that you are probably going to sell the house," my brother said, a sad yet oddly anxious tone coloring his words.

"There's really no reason for me to keep it, Sam. I'm certainly not going to move back into it and renting it is out of the question because I'm not back here to make sure Dane doesn't do something to make the place uninhabitable. Do you want it? I have no problem signing it over to you...or whatever I would have to do to transfer ownership."

"Look, Hunter, Mom was very precise. You can't give it away, you have to either sell it or keep it. I'd love the house but we can't afford to buy you out and Trina doesn't want to sell this place. Even if you could give it to me, I'd be torn...we could use the money from the sale but then we all grew up in that house so it has sentimental value to me."

"Which means you really wish I wouldn't sell it, either," I interpreted. When he didn't answer, I said, "Well, whatever I decide, I will guarantee that it will not go to Dane."

Sam looked at his watch. "We need to get ready for the wake. Hunter, are you sure you -"

"I am positive. Even if Mom and I had been speaking, I wouldn't attend her wake. I think it's morbid. She's dead. That's not her laying in that box, it's a badly made-up shell. Why would I, or anyone else, want that to be my very last memory of her?"

"Reverend Massey insisted on a wake. Dane agreed...he's a deacon, you know."

I rolled my eyes in disgust. "Why am I not surprised? What about what you wanted?"

"I wanted what she wanted and she wanted things done in accordance with the church's bylaws."

I nodded. "The church." My voice was not without its hostility. "Hasn't that church already done enough to divide this family?"

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11.

After I left Sam's, I drove to a supermarket and picked up some groceries and necessities for the

house. There was plenty of food there but not a lot that was in my normal diet or that appealed to me. Once I got back to Mom's, I would really take a look around and see what needed to be done. I suppose I should have started going through everything and deciding what I would keep and have shipped back to California and what I would sell.

Four bags full and a hundred dollars later, I pulled into Mom's driveway. Mom's. It was my place now. Yet, regardless of legal ownership, I could never think of it as such. It never felt like my home even when I lived here.

After putting everything away, I moved to the living room to see if the cable-tv was still connected. I figured it would be paid for until the end of the month. I know I should have been more productive but I just wanted to relax. I sat on the couch, swilling an energy drink, flipping through basic cable channels and wondering what Lisa was doing at that very moment. So I called her cell phone.

It was on the sixth ring before she picked up. When she said 'Hi,' the smile in her voice matched my own.

"Hi yourself. Just thought I'd see what you were up to." The memory of her writhing in my arms threatened to overload my sexual circuitry.

"I'm at your mother's wake." her voice was hushed. "Well, actually, I stepped outside to answer your call."

"What are you doing there?"

"My parents insisted. I tried to tell them I really hadn't seen your mother since high school, other than running into her occasionally around town and that I had planned on going to the funeral but, well, you know my mother..."

"Yes. I'm sure she had something to say about my not being there with my brothers."

"She had a few comments. The most interesting was, after she viewed the body, she turned to me and said that you're the spitting image of your mother."

"Your mother's saying I look like a sixty-year-old dead woman?"

"Hunter!" She laughed in spite of herself. I loved that sound. I suppose I sounded cold, but at least I was honest.

"How was Dane to you?"

"He gave me a few glares of disgust but nothing I haven't seen a hundred times magnified in a courtroom, so I just gave him my sweetest smile and moved on." There was silence between us and then she said, "Did you call for anything in particular or just to get people to give me dirty looks for not remembering to turn my cell phone off."

"I was just wondering what you might be doing for dinner."

"Oh. Sorry. I have a date."

My heart sank to my feet and all the blood in my body went with it. Well, of course, she could have a date. She had a long-distance girlfriend she rarely saw and she certainly wasn't expecting me to show up in town. It was entirely possible that she had made previous plans. "You do?" It came out a little more weakly than I wanted it to.

"Yeah. She hasn't actually asked me yet but I know she's going to so I'm waiting."

Aha. The little stinker was talking about me. "Well, she should hurry up and ask you then, huh? If she doesn't, somebody better might come along and beat her to the punch."

"Well, there is nobody better so I don't think that will be a problem."

I was taking great pleasure in this. "So where is she taking you?"

"Let's see...I think it should be Atomic Seltzer's for drinks and Lariat's for dinner."

I had never heard of Atomic Seltzer's but Lariat's I knew well. It was a steak house, decorated in western motif and it had been around for years. The food was great, the prices were reasonable and the dress code was casual. "And...after dinner?"

"I think a nightcap will definitely be in order."

"Mmmm. Absolutely. And, uh, when is she picking you up?"

"I think she should be picking me up at six-thirty. At my place."

"She'll see you there. Enjoy the rest of your wake."

"Oh, yeah. I will," she said, dryly, "because, you know, it's such a festive occasion."

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By the time I left to pick up Lisa for dinner, I had started sorting through my mother's clothes and had most of the contents of her closet laid out on her bed. Orion decided first to be my helper and then when I kept finding items I had placed on the nightstand on the floor, I put anything 'bat-able' out of her reach, she then switched to supervising. I still felt she was entrapping me by making me think she had mellowed, so I stayed alert around her.

I thought about what to do with Mom's clothes. My mother did have excellent taste and always dressed very stylishly without looking garish. She took care of her wardrobe, expertly repairing what needed it and discarding what couldn't be saved, unlike me, who wore an article of clothing

until it was nothing but threads held together by willpower. Just one more thing we butted heads on. Dividing the clothes into categories of dressy, casual and inbetween, I would save my decision until tomorrow but I was leaning toward donating everything to the local battered women's shelter.

I pulled into Lisa's driveway, thinking she might meet me outside once she heard the Jeep so when she didn't, I went up to her door and was about to knock when the door swung open. "Hi," she grinned, clearly happy to see me. She stood against the door frame and pulled me inside.

"Hey." I looked her over, appreciatively. "You look great." She was wearing form-fitting, faded jeans that hung low on her hips and a lightweight, v-neck pullover that revealed a hint of cleavage and didn't quite make it to her belt which showed off a bit of luscious skin.

She stepped up to me and greeted me with a kiss that warmed me to the bone. It wasn't quick but she didn't linger, either. She took a handful of my jersey and led me through a long hallway to her kitchen. "Let me introduce you to the boys and then I'll show you around." Opening a sliding glass door, she whistled and within seconds, two greyhounds were bounding into the room, whimpering and barking, tails and rear ends wagging, looking as though they were trying to turn themselves inside out. "Hey, hey...come on, settle. Settle," she ordered them in a voice that was commanding but not harsh. It took them a couple minutes but they finally calmed down. "Hunter, this is Azizi, which is Egyptian for precious," she touched the head of the brindle-colored one, "and this is Sadiki, which is Egyptian for faithful. But around here, they're just plain Oz and Deke." She scratched behind the ears of the fawn-colored one. "You can pet them. They are very gentle and friendly."

I reached down, the gesture alone prompting both dogs approach me; Deke rubbing up against me like a cat and Oz leaning against my leg. Oz licked my hand, happily and Deke put his mouth around my wrist, gently grasping but not biting. "Why Egyptian names?" I pet the dogs affectionately.

"The Egyptians worshiped greyhounds as gods and from what I understand they are descendants of a breed that goes back to ancient Egyptian times. Besides, I didn't name them. But I did nickname them," she grinned. "So would you like to show you around?"

"Sure. I would like that. But...I'm not so sure I'm going to make it past the bedroom, so maybe we should go out first."

"Horny devil, aren't ya?" She reached up and pinched my cheek. I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my arms and action which made her gasp and the dogs to start to fidget and whimper again, bouncing around us.

"Just being honest," I told her, our lips almost touching.

Never taking her eyes off me, she snapped her fingers at the dogs who stopped bouncing. "Well, it's not like I'm starving or anything..." she commented, with a lift of her eyebrow.

Not kissing her at this point was just not an option. When the kiss broke, I tapped her gently her on the nose. "I want to take you out to dinner. Knowing what is going to happen after dinner is just going to make it that much more...eh...appetizing."

She took my face in her hands and kissed me again. "Then let's skip Atomic Seltzer and just go to Lariat's. We can have drinks there. And then let's come back here so that you can...have the *grand* tour."

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Walking into Lariat's was like stepping into a time warp. It had not changed since the last time I was there for Sam's graduation dinner when I was fifteen. The exterior facade made it look like a saloon from the late eighteen hundreds and the interior tried to give the customer the same feel. Inside was a spacious, wood-finished, old west-style decor, low-lit which helped create a somewhat romantic atmosphere. Sawdust and peanut shells were spread out on the floor which added to the ambiance and the walls were decorated with knotted ropes and lassos and old-fashioned photographs. They were famous for their moderately priced steaks that were cooked on an oak-fired grill and their multi-counter salad bar.

We were shown to a booth with high-backed seats and Lisa ordered us a bottle of wine. I kept sneaking peeks at her over the top of my menu, still not quite believing how beautiful she had become and that we had spent such a remarkable night and morning together. After our orders were taken and our wine was poured, Lisa insisted on a toast. I raised my glass to touch hers and she said, "To dreams coming true." As we drank to that, it was also hard for me to believe that she had held these feelings for me for so long. It was flattering as well as scary. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint her with the real me replacing her fantasy of me.

We were almost finished with our extremely comfortable and enjoyable dinner when a voice we both recognized busted our private little bubble. That was the other thing about Lariat's, it was the premiere meeting place in town, especially on a Friday night.

"Hey! What are you two doing here?" came the surprised question from Lesley. She approached our table, her breasts reaching us five seconds before she did. Her attention snapped back and forth between us like she was watching a tennis match.

"Eating?" Lisa answered, with a 'duh' tone to her voice.

Lesley reacted to that by shooting her sister a very nasty glare. She then focused on me. This was going to be interesting. "I thought you were going to call me."

"Gee, Les, I don't remember saying that," I said, amiably. "I've only been here a day and I've been kind of busy."

"Not too busy for my sister to get her claws in you."

"Well, I do have to eat," I reasoned, hoping she'd go away soon.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Lisa asked her sister.

"We got our babysitter to come over watch the boys so Wally and I could go out and have a nice evening out."

"Well, enjoy," Lisa said, dismissively.

"Yeah, I know why you're trying to get rid of me," Lesley said to Lisa, shaking her head and snorting. She glanced at the bottle of wine, then at Lisa and smirked. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say this looks like I interrupted a romantic dinner. What's Sharyn going to say if it gets back to her that you're sniffing after another woman, regardless of how useless your pursuit might be?" Before Lisa could respond to that, Lesley turned her attention to me. "You'd better be careful, Hunter. People are going to think you two are together."

"We are together," I told her, frankly.

"No, I know you're together, here in the restaurant, dining, but they're going to think you're *together*, you know what I mean?"

I looked her dead in the eye and reached across the table, taking Lisa's hand in mine. "We are *together*, Lesley," I said, putting the same emphasis on the word as she did. I realized this wasn't the time or the place or how I wanted to get into this with her but I couldn't tolerate her ignorance and her thinking that I would in any way, agree with her assessment of homosexuality being wrong and disgusting. I felt Lisa squeeze my hand. Lesley was shocked.

"Wait. What? You mean...?" She stared at our joined hands, then at her sister and then at me. She got very quiet, her voice hushed. "Oh, I see. So I really did interrupt a romantic dinner."

"No. This is just dinner. The romance will be later," Lisa smiled.

"That's...that's really repulsive." She was glaring daggers at me.

"You weren't invited over here, Les. If you don't like it, then by all means, go back to your own table," I advised her. "And, just for the record? What's really repulsive is your attitude and behavior."

"Is that so?" she said, coolly. "Well, I'm not the carpet muncher here, am I?"

"Lesley, for Christ's sake..." Lisa began, looking down at the table.

I let go of Lisa's hand and studied my former best friend. "Tell me something...when's the last time you gave your husband a blow job?"

Staring at me, appalled, she said, "That's none of your business!"

"You're right. So why do you feel my sex life is any of yours?" I let it sink in. "Now if you'll excuse us, we'd like to finish our wine, pay our check and get out of here."

"No wonder your mother disowned you," she spat out before turning on her heel and walking away.

"Well...that went well," I said to Lisa, who was concentrating on her wine glass. When she looked up at me, she was flushed, trying to restrain her anger and embarrassment. "I'm sorry about that, Hunter."

I once again took her hand in mine. "You have as much reason to apologize for your sister as I do for my brother. Let it go, okay?" Hearing someone politely clear her throat, I looked up to see our server with our check. She saw our entwined fingers and a tiny smile curled the corner of her mouth.

"I'll take that whenever you're ready."

"You can take it now, I think we're ready." I released Lisa's hand and we both reached for a credit card at the same time. I handed mine to the young woman first and she walked away. Before Lisa could protest, I said, "I asked you, remember?"

"Not really."

"Whatever," I grinned at her. "Let's just get out of here. I have some serious plans for you."

I do believe she actually blushed.

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12.

I never had sex with two dogs watching before. There was something perverse about it, especially since they seem so focused and interested. I finally asked Lisa if she minded shutting them out of the bedroom...at least until we were ready to go to sleep.

It probably would have been wiser to go back to my mother's as I still didn't trust that Dane wouldn't use his key again and destroy the place. But unless he'd had me followed - which I would never put anything past him - he wouldn't know whether I was home or not without having to enter the property. And I had hopefully intimidated him away from that idea. Tomorrow the locks would be changed and it would no longer be a concern. In the meantime, I wanted to be with Lisa more than anything and she wanted us to 'christen' her house.

Making love to her was like a revelation. Before, with the women in my past, including Jennifer Visson, it had always felt like a physical release and nothing more, regardless of how initially exciting. But with Lisa, sex actually meant something, I felt alive in a way I never had before. She elicited sensations and emotions within me that were new yet familiar and like I was always

meant to be with her.

She led the greyhounds into the hallway and returned, closing the door behind her. She ran to the bed and jumped, landing on the empty space next to me and I grabbed her and pulled her to me before she bounced right over me and onto the floor. Laughing, I rolled over on top of her and kissed her with abandon and she manipulated her fingers into me and proceeded to fuck me into oblivion. We traded orgasms into the night before we were both lulled to sleep by the rhythm of rain beating against the roof. The time I was spending with her, in and out of bed, was heady and stirring and inspiring and I never wanted to let her go.

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While we had been in bed the night before, her mother had called and left several messages, warning Lisa away from me. I wasn't quite sure what was so bad about me. I thought I had done pretty well with my life so far...especially for someone who grew up being told she would never amount to anything. And it certainly wasn't me that turned her daughter into a lesbian. Well...not really. Before we got up that morning, three more calls came in registered from Mrs. Riordan, one of the messages stating that she just didn't understand why Lisa felt the need to flaunt her personal life in public, that maybe she was okay with that but it was embarrassing to the rest of the family. I mentioned to Lisa that I bet they didn't think twice about Lesley 'flaunting her personal life' in public. That double standard always pissed me off. What was 'flaunting' about having dinner in a restaurant?

"I love her but she drives me crazy," Lisa said, pouring me a cup of coffee. "I keep hoping that someday she'll change."

"And I keep hoping that I'll be reincarnated as Angelina Jolie's thong. Somehow I don't think either has a chance of happening."

Also, just before we had fallen asleep, her cell phone rang. When she listened to that voice mail, her expression was one of surprise, sadness and then annoyed frustration. Lesley had called her 'sort of' girlfriend, Sharyn, and told her that Lisa was sleeping with someone else and that she thought she should know. I guessed correctly that Sharyn was not a fan of Lesley's either, and wanted Lisa to call her so that she could ask her what was going on.

While we were sitting at her table, working on our second pot of coffee and having split a toasted bagel, her cell phone rang and it was Sharyn again. I knew the only reason Lisa did not want to take the call was that she didn't want to hurt her 'sort of' girlfriend but she knew she had to tell her the truth. I didn't want to listen but Lisa stayed at the table when she answered her phone. When I went to stand up to leave the room and give her some privacy, her fingers gently curled around my forearm, indicating she wanted me to stay.

"Hi." Her voice was subdued. "No, I was home last night." She closed her eyes. "No, I wasn't asleep." She listened for a few seconds and then her hand tightened over my arm. "No, Sharyn, Lesley was telling you the truth." Her head dropped. "Yes. I'm sorry." My hand covered hers and patted it, reassuringly. "Hunter Roberge...yes, *the* Hunter Roberge." She listened some more.

"Look, honey, we've known this has been coming for a long time. I'm just sorry it had to be like this...no, I had no idea she was going to be here...yes, of course I would have told you." More listening. I could tell by her face that she was taking heat from a woman who may not have considered herself as 'sort of' as Lisa did. "Yes, she's still here." She closed her eyes. "No, Sharyn, don't come back early, there's no need...well, I would have preferred it had happened differently, too...I'm sorry, I don't know what else to say to you that will make it hurt any less." She flashed her eyes at me, biting her lip. "Well, that won't happen. I -" She closed the phone and set it on the table. "She hung up. Do you know how much I hate my sister right now?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

"I would have told her about you. But I would have done it in person. She didn't deserve finding out this way."

I brought her fingers to my lips and kissed every one of them. "Lisa...maybe you should have taken a little time to think about breaking up with her. You do realize I'm not staying here, right?" Saying that caused my insides to nearly collapse, as it meant leaving her.

"I know. But as far as my relationship with Sharyn goes, that doesn't make a difference. Whether you're here or three thousand miles away, my heart belongs to you, Hunter. It's always belonged to you."

We studied at each other, meaningfully. I then rested my forehead on the back of her hand. "I know this sounds insane but I wish I could take you with me when I go. I know I don't have the right to ask you to give up everything you've worked for here but I know I can't live here and I don't want to be without you."

"No, it doesn't sound insane, Hunter. What probably sounds more insane is that I believe this - you and I - was always meant to be. Nothing has ever felt more right."

I nodded. I knew what she meant because I felt it, too. I realized we had only been together two nights but I had known her since I was eight years old, even though I had never paid much attention to her until now. It was like we were pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly together. I stood up and pulled her to a standing position and into a very tight embrace.

"There are forests and parks here, too, you know. You wouldn't have to live right in Otter Falls," she said into my neck.

I kissed the top of her head. "I just can't see myself coming back here to live."

"Looks like we have a dilemma then, huh?"

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Relieved that the house was still intact when I got back to my mother's, I fed the cat, changed her litter and went back up to Mom's room to continue with the sorting of her clothes.

Everything was happening so fast and my head was starting to spin. I did not want to move back to Vermont, there were too many bad memories here, too many restrictions that I no longer had to live by, too many closed minds still, too much repression. And yet, I was already visualizing sharing my mother's or Lisa's house with Lisa. I had never thought in terms of living with someone before, of sharing that kind of space or time with anyone but it was almost painful to think of not going to sleep and waking up every morning with her.

And how was that possible with someone I had just become reacquainted with *two days ago*? Was I crazy? I certainly couldn't blame it on overwrought emotions due to my mother's death because I honestly didn't feel much of anything about that. All I knew was that something hit me like an anvil upon seeing Lisa at her party and it wasn't going away. She seemed to occupy every waking second I had and in a rare moment of possessiveness, the thought of her not being with me and ending up with someone else was unbearable and I literally had to swallow a sense of panic, the intensity of which I had never before experienced.

I sat down on a chair next to my mother's bed, somewhat dazed and feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me. What was going on?

Before I could get too introspective, I heard the doorbell ring. It was probably the locksmiths and it was a needed distraction. I went downstairs and opened the door to reveal a nice looking, very well dressed middle aged man, holding a clipboard.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so," he smiled. "My name is Bill DeMartino and I'm running against Dane Roberge for congress. I'm gathering signatures for a petition to open an investigation into Alderman Roberge's transference of funds between various departments while he's been in off-"

"Where do I sign?" I enthusiastically grabbed the pen attached to the clipboard and scribbled my name on the line where he tapped his finger. It didn't matter to me what they were investigating, just knowing that they found his ethics questionable confirmed my feelings of constant disappointment in his conduct. I'm sure whatever they thought he did, it was worse.

I knew my signature wouldn't mean shit as I was not a registered voter here but I wanted my name in big letters on any petition that might finally make my brother responsible for his actions and take him down at least one peg. I finished writing my name as legibly as I could.

"Thank you..." He looked down at the petition in his hand, "Mrs -"

"Ms.," I corrected.

"Ms...Roberge." He then looked up at me, eyes wide in surprise.

"I'm his sister," I grinned. "And good luck," I told him, sincerely, shaking his hand vigorously. I closed the door. Now *that* made my day. And probably Mr. Bill DeMartino's day, as well.

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Twenty minutes after that, Pucinski's showed up and proceeded to change the the locks on all the doors, the three that led into the house and the one that led into the garage. Once they were done, I was relieved that Dane no longer had legal or physical access to the house.

I was torn as to whether or not to make an appearance at my mother's funeral. At the last minute, I decided not to go. I knew that would make Sam feel badly but my attendance there would be dishonest plus, the stir it would cause would take the focus away from the real reason people were there.

By the middle of the afternoon, I had the room pretty much cleaned out and organized and my mother's clothes in large green garbage bags which were now lined up in the downstairs hallway, ready for me to load them into the Jeep and take them away. I then went into the sewing room to see what was unfinished and what was completed and maybe needed to be distributed to whoever had ordered and paid for the clothes and costumes. I decided I would tackle that tomorrow. I knew there was nothing to clean out of the guest room closet but there was still a full wardrobe of clothes in my old room. I added that to the list of tasks I would attempt tomorrow.

I went downstairs and grabbed a beer out of the fridge and had just taken my first swallow when I heard a persistent pounding on the door. It was too early for it to be Lisa, who had agreed to come over after the funeral and little soiree at the church afterward. I swung the door open to see a very pissed off Lesley standing there. Before I could say anything, she pushed past me, reeking of whiskey.

"Why don't you come in?" I said to the air, as I shut the door and turned to face her. She stood there with her hands on her hips.

"I just need to know one thing, Hunter. Were you like this before? In school?"

"Like what?" I wasn't going to make this easy for her.

"You know like what. A dyke, were you a dyke in high school?"

"Yes."

"God damn it, Hunter! Why didn't you tell me?" She was slurring her words and wobbling slightly.

"Why would I tell you? Especially if this was the way you were going to behave." And I couldn't trust that she wouldn't have outed me to the world.

"I was your best friend, best friends are supposed to tell each other everything. How could you have kept something like this from me? You owed it to me to let me know!"

"I didn't owe you a damn thing, Les. My orientation had nothing to do with you."

"People might have thought I was one of you, too."

"Well, they didn't. Hooray for my team." She totally missed my slam.

"You know, I wondered why you kept staring at my tits that first night. Now I know why." After two tries, she finally crossed her arms over her ample chest.

"Well, first, you nearly poked my eyes out with them so it was pretty hard to miss them. Second, the Pope would find it difficult to tear his eyes away from those things! They're like freaking pontoons!"

"My husband likes them just fine!" She spit out at me.

"He must be overcompensating for not being breastfed as a baby." I shot back.

"You're just jealous that it's his mouth that's on them and not yours!"

"Jesus, Lesley, he must have a pie hole like a large mouth bass. No, thank you, your husband can have them. Your sister's are just fine for me." I closed my eyes. I didn't want to open that particular can of worms. Too late.

She stopped dead and cocked her head, squinting at me, suspiciously. "Did you turn my sister? Is that why you left town? Is that why she's a dyke, too? Is that why she never stopped crushing on you?"

I was really beginning to resent this implication. "I never touched your sister! She was fucking *fourteen-years-old* when I left."

"Well, isn't that the best time to recruit them? When they are young and vulnerable like that?"

I was agape. "What planet do you live on? That is such backward thinking and I honestly shouldn't justify that with a reply. *Recruit them?* Get your ignorant ass online or to the library and educate yourself! Your sister was born a lesbian, as was I. Fortunately, she openly acknowledged her sexuality a lot sooner than I did and caused herself a lot less pain."

"So you were really like this in high school? I mean...I used to get undressed in front of you in the locker rooms. We've spent the night at each other's houses..."

"Oh, Christ. And nothing happened, did it? No advances were ever made toward you, were they? You were never touched in an inappropriate manner, were you?"

"No." And then, after a beat, "Why? What's wrong with me?"

"What?" She was giving me a headache.

"Aren't I attractive? Why wouldn't you come on to me? What's wrong with me?"

I was speechless. Then, "Lesley...what *is* wrong with you? You were not like this in high school. You were the one who told all the snobby cheerleaders and jocks to shut the fuck up when they picked on Joey Lassiter and called him gayboy and fruitcup and JoeHo and faggot. You had them towing the line. What happened to that girl?"

"She smartened up," she declared, indignantly.

"Really? Are you sure? Because spewing hate isn't smart. And it's really unattractive on you. And it's made you very hard-looking."

Her hand immediately went to her face. "That really wasn't nice, Hunter."

"Oh, and your remarks and comments have been?" I took another swallow of beer. "Come on, Lesley, I don't buy that you really believe all the crap you say now. It sounds to me like you're the mouthpiece for bigoted views you feel compelled to repeat out of some misguided love and loyalty. What happens if you don't agree with your husband or your parents? I guarantee the world won't stop turning."

She took a defiant step toward me. "I *do* believe what I say!"

"Well, then," I went back over to the door and opened it, "we have nothing more to discuss. You go back to your little Stepford Wife existence. But keep your husband's opinions to yourself when you're around me. Come back and talk to me when you get a mind of your own." I gestured her outside.

"Fuck you, Hunter."

"She'd be the best lay you ever had," Lisa commented, breezing by her sister in the doorway.

"That's disgusting." Lesley glared at her sister. "I thought you were at church."

"I saw you leave. I had a good idea you were going to come here." Lisa's tone was not amused.

"This your new home now? You two going to set up house?"

"What is this really about, Lesley?" Lisa asked, putting her arms around me and kissing me on the cheek while Lesley's mouth dropped open. "Are you really repulsed or are you jealous of me?"

"You're both sick!" She staggered by us and out the door.

We watched her try not to teeter down the front walk. "She's drunk."

"She's always drunk. She's too miserable to be sober."

"That's sad."

"That's an understatement." She took my Guinness from me and took a drink.

Taking a relieved breath, I studied her. "You're nothing like your family. Where did you come from?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Obviously the same cabbage patch you did."

I lifted her chin with my thumb and forefinger. "Well...I don't care where you came from. I'm just glad you're here." I kissed her and hugged her again.

"I'm glad I'm here, too."

I looked back at Lesley, standing on the sidewalk, appearing as though she couldn't decide which way to go. "Did she walk from the church?"

"Well...more like she staggered from the church, actually."

I sighed. "We can't let her walk down the street like that."

"Yeah," she sighed. "Somebody might step on her hands."

I kissed her forehead, snickering. "How about you go round her up and I'll get the Jeep, we'll toss her in the back and get her home."

"Oh, boy, this should be fun," Lisa said, without any enthusiasm.

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13.

Protesting wildly, Lesley finally agreed to allow us to take her home. She wanted to go back to the church, where she had been with her parents, but Lisa talked her out of it, reasoning that Lesley's inebriation would only bring on a tirade from their mother. Not that Lesley didn't deserve to have her ass chewed off, Lisa added, after all the problems her big mouth had caused the last twenty-four hours.

Lesley lived in Teabury, which was a town fifteen miles northeast of Otter Falls, most of the houses accessible only by unpaved roads. I had not been up in this area since Lesley and I attended a graduation party when we were both eighteen. It had not changed much, it was still mostly dense woods, dirt streets and log cabins. Five hundred thousand dollar log cabins. She

had always dreamed of living in this small, elite community. I wondered if she married her current husband just to get that wish.

It had been another unseasonably warm day, so I had removed the canvas top from the Jeep, not really thinking or concerned about how the breeze was assaulting Lesley in the back seat. She wasn't too pleased but I figured the fresh air would do her good. Unfortunately, the wind didn't shut her up and, in between taking regular hits from a flask in her purse, she accused us of doing everything evil except being on the grassy knoll in 1963. We were twisted, we were going to hell, we were the devil's spawn, we should have to register as sex offenders where ever we lived, we shouldn't be allowed around children, our lifestyle was going to tear a hole in the universe...okay, she didn't actually say that but she might as well have. I was getting fed up very quickly with listening to her channel Fred Phelps.

She didn't respond to Lisa's requests to knock it off and then, like a four-year-old throwing a tantrum, she began kicking the back of my seat with her high-heeled shoes.

"Lesley! Stop it!" Both Lisa and I hollered at the same time.

"Aw, isn't that sweet? You both even yell in perfect harmony. It's a match made in purgatory," she commented loud enough for us to hear, a sour look adorning her already nasty expression. She folded her arms across her chest again.

I was done. Spotting a huge mud puddle ahead in the road, I jammed my foot on the gas and sped through it, a wave of thick, brown water cresting over the windshield, missing Lisa and me and covering Lesley, drenching her with a resounding slap. Seeing her in the rear view mirror nearly caused me to drive off the road. Looking in the back seat, Lisa put her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh but couldn't stop herself.

Lesley was speechless for the first time in twenty minutes. But it had to have been difficult to try to talk with a mouthful of wet, slimy dirt. She looked like one of those women who had just climbed out of a spa mud bath - except she didn't have cucumber slices over her eyes and she was attired in more than a towel. Gee. I hoped that dress wasn't too expensive.

"Ou bith!" she screamed, spitting mud out.

"Bith?" Lisa repeated, still giggling uncontrollably. "What's a bith?"

"I don't know," I shrugged, "but apparently I am one."

"Thop thith cah ite nah!" She was wiping her eyes and mouth with a filthy sleeve.

So I stopped the car, just assuming that's what she said, putting the Jeep in neutral and setting the emergency brake. I turned to look at her. "Oops. Didn't see that puddle until it was too late."

"Bullshit! Fuck you, Hunter. You're going to pay for cleaning this suit!"

"Okay," I agreed, willingly. It was worth it.

She was inspecting herself, shaking her head, an action that seemed to make her dizzy. She looked up at me. "Great. Now I have to pee."

"How much farther to your house?"

"Maybe ten more minutes," Lisa supplied.

"I can't make it," Lesley announced, pouting, removing her seat belt.

I looked around, "You're going to go here?"

"I could pee in the Jeep." She stared at me, looking as though she might just do that.

Granted, at this point, with the amount of mud and water that decorated the back seat, it might not have made a difference. I was probably going to have to have it thoroughly cleaned anyway, but I did not want to have that memory of my high school best friend, regardless of how damaged our friendship was now, squatting and relieving herself. "No. Go do what you have to do."

"Just watch nature's toilet paper with the three pointy leaves!" Lisa called after her sister, who stumbled over to an area with a low rock wall. She stepped over the wall, fell, swore up a storm, helped herself back up and dropped her drawers right there. "She's a gem, aint she?" Lisa asked, rhetorically, shaking her head. We both turned around, letting Lesley have a modicum of privacy whether she wanted it or not. Swatting me, Lisa started to laugh again. "I can't believe you did that."

"You loved it," I reached over and patted her thigh.

"Yeah. I did," she grinned.

"She's pretty trashed. She's really like this all the time?"

"Usually not this bad. And never when she's got the boys with her...at least I don't think so. God, I hope not. I think finding out about you may have triggered this little binge."

"I'm just shocked that she's so hateful. How have you put up with this all these years?"

"I ignore her. I'm used to it, so -"

"Hey. Heeeeey..." We turned in the direction of the voice. "Can somebody help me here?"

All we saw were two legs ending in high heels sticking straight up in the air in the shape of a V behind the stone wall.

We both rolled our eyes as I backed up the Jeep, parked it and went to the wall, helping Lesley upright. "What happened?" I asked.

Once she was on her feet, she shook us both off. "I was climbing back over and I sat down to readjust my shoe. And then I was on my back."

Right where she had relieved herself, I noted, silently. I was going to have to boil my hands for an hour when I got back to my mother's. We walked behind her as she started to climb back into the Jeep and then she stopped and started shaking her head.

"Oh, no. No, no, no..." Lesley turned around, wagging her finger at me. She then pointed to the puddle. "I'm not falling for that again. I'll walk around it and you can meet me on the other side."

"Lesley, Jesus," Lisa began, but I put my hand on her arm.

"No, if she feels more comfortable walking around, let her go."

"That's the smartest thing you've said all day," Lesley mumbled as she moved away from us. Her heels were puncturing the soft ground with every step, making her even less steady on her feet. It was actually quite comical.

I nodded my head toward the Jeep and we got in. I released the brake and wiggled the stick shift in neutral and waited. When I saw that Lesley was halfway around the puddle, I stepped on the gas pedal, barely hitting first gear.

Lisa's eyes got wide. "Oh, no, you're not..."

Oh, yes I was. Sailing through the puddle at a different angle, this time very little mud went into the back seat, instead crowning to my left and soaking Lesley again. Whatever parts of her that weren't wet before were not so lucky this time. Throwing the car in park on the other side of the puddle, I looked back at her. She stood there, frozen in place, eyes still closed, mud dripping off her nose and chin.

"Hunter, you are so bad," Lisa snorted, in a hushed tone.

"Okay. I'll behave now," I told her. "Hey, Lesley, come on, we haven't got all day, you know." I tried to sound my most annoyed but I couldn't help smirking.

She refused to get back into the Jeep or to speak to either one of us and walked the rest of the way home as we followed behind her, an endeavor that took forty-five minutes instead of ten. By the time she reached her front porch, she had her shoes in her hands, her stockings were all torn on her feet and she was limping and hobbling. Practically crawling up the three steps to the door, she turned to look at us, scornfully. "Heh. I made it. Guess I showed you two."

"Yep, you sure did," Lisa nodded, admirably keeping a straight face.

After Lesley slammed the door, I put the Jeep in gear and pulled out of the driveway. "Well, that was fun. Want to go back to my place and order some pizza?"

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"Do you really think she's jealous of you?" I asked, as we parked in the driveway of my mother's house.

"Yeah. Not in a sexual way, of course. I just think she's jealous that I now have a bigger piece of you than she does and a piece that she can never compete with me to get."

We exited the Jeep and she followed me to the side of the house, where I turned the faucet on and picked up the hose, dragging it to the driveway. I began rinsing the caked-on mud out of interior of the Jeep.

"Think you can get it clean?" Lisa asked. The animated look on her face made me think she was reminiscing about the earlier bath we gave her sister.

"No. But at least I can get it to the point where Sam doesn't have a heart attack when he sees it." I would make sure I would do what I had to do to make it as in good condition as it was when my brother handed me the keys.

Lisa took my set of keys and disappeared into the garage, opening the door and returning a few minutes later with a pail and sponges. Together we washed the Jeep, making it practically shine. The seats would have to dry out before I could assess what else needed to be done to them but again, whatever I would have to pay to fix it was worth what I did to get them that way.

Then, once we were finished, I saturated Lisa with water from the hose as she doused me with the contents of the pail while chasing me around the Jeep. Catching me, we fell against the mounted spare tire and I held her against me, kissing her.

I'm sure my mother's neighbors were scandalized.

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Once inside the house, Lisa accompanied me upstairs and we took a hot shower together as the evening temperatures were starting to set in and we were both a little chilled from being water-logged. We spent more time making love than warming up and getting clean. Not that either one of us were complaining.

After she found a t-shirt and a pair of light sweatpants in my old bedroom to wear, she helped me divide the finished from the unfinished projects in the sewing room. We also placed swatches of material and sewing accessories into separate piles. I was going to wait until tomorrow but now I was glad it was done. Lisa had talked me into doing something to get my mind off the frustration Lesley had conjured up in me. I would have thought the sex would have remedied any frustration

I had and it did but not enough.

We were in the living room, watching television and snuggling, waiting on a pizza we had ordered when another knock came on the door. Looking at Lisa, I rolled my eyes. If it was either Dane or Lesley (which I doubted. I didn't think Lesley was going to be on her feet too much for the next couple of days), I was really going to lose my temper.

Swinging the door open with vigor, ready to take the head off of whoever was standing there, I calmed down when I saw the soft brown eyes of Sam. "Come on in. Where's Trina?"

"She's home. Hunter, why didn't you show up? I know you said you weren't going to do the wake, but this was the funeral. You really should have been there." He followed me into the living room. "Hey, Lisa."

"Hey, Sam. It was a nice service."

"Thanks. And thanks for being there." He then glared at me. "Why weren't you there with her?"

I shrugged. "It just didn't feel right. I just thought my presence there would have caused too much of a stir and the service should have been about Mom not about speculation and gossip about me."

He stopped and thought about that. "Okay. That is a good point." He slipped his tie off and undid the top button of his shirt. "By the way, the garage door is open, you might want to close it before you settle in for the night. Hey, I saw that you washed the Jeep. That was nice of you but unless you get it, you know, really funky, don't worry about it, okay?"

"Sure," I replied, sneaking a guilty glance at Lisa.

"And you might want to put the top up next time," he suggested. "Good thing it's all-weather upholstery."

"Yeah. Sorry. I got a little carried away."

He nodded, not appearing bothered by the wet interior of the Jeep. "Lisa, I saw that you left right in the middle of Dane's eulogy."

"Yeah. Sorry, Sam, was that too rude?" She blinked up at him.

"Hell, no, I was envious." He looked at the beer in my hand. "Got any more of those?"

"I bet if you looked in the refrigerator, you might find a couple."

Returning to the living room with beer in hand, he pointed to the garbage bags. "What are those? Did you clean out your old room?"

"No, I haven't really been in there yet. They're Mom's clothes. That's not a problem, is it? I figured it would be easier for me to go through them as I had the least attachment."

"Do you really not feel anything about her being gone?"

"Sam, come on, face it. We were dead to each other years ago."

"That's not what I asked you."

I glanced over at Lisa, who looked like she wanted to be in a different room before I returned my attention to my brother. "I spent the last sixteen years conditioning myself not to feel anything. I did it to protect myself. It became easier for me to be the hard-ass and convince myself that I didn't care, instead of having to come to terms with the fact that my mother didn't care. I held onto that hope for nine years that she would see me and all would be okay. After that I closed my heart from getting it broken by her again. So, to answer your question, I really do not feel anything about her being gone."

There was dead silence. He turned to Lisa as he took a long drink, not knowing what to say.

"Hey, how 'bout them Red Sox, huh?" she said, breaking the slight tension in the room.

"Listen," he put his hand up in surrender, "I'm not judging you, Hunter, I'm just trying to get a handle on the way you're thinking, that's all."

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Just don't presume to think you know everything about me. I'm not the same scared, broken teenager who left here all those years ago."

"Okay. I get it. None of us are the same anymore. I won't bring it up again."

"Thank you."

"You want to stay for some pizza, Sam?" Lisa asked him, flipping through the TV channels.

"Actually, I'd love to but I should get back home to my wife and the dinner she's cooking me. You know what? You two should come to dinner one night while you're still here, Hunter."

I looked over at Lisa, who nodded enthusiastically. "Okay. Set it up with Trina and it's a plan."

"I will. She'll love it." He regarded Lisa, curiously. "Hey, I'm wondering about something...how does Lesley feel about this whole thing going on between you two?"

Lisa and I exchanged smirks and we both sighed at almost the same time. "If I said to you that Lesley and Dane would be a great match, would that answer your question?"

He looked heavenward and took a long pull off his bottle of Guinness. "Oy."

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14.

After closing and locking everything up, we went back to Lisa's for the night because of the dogs. She did not spend a lot of time away from them unless it was necessary and when she was going to have to leave them for any length of time, she always made arrangements for them not to be alone. However, she did have a pet door installed and they had a safely enclosed dog run and weight activated food and water dispensers just in case something came up and she could not get home to them. She loved them very much and they just worshipped her. I didn't blame them.

There was never any question that we would spend the night together, regardless of where. It was just a given that it would happen, as if we'd been sharing a bed for years. And each time we made love seemed to bring out a different level of passion that was electrifying and intoxicating and I just wanted to fuse myself to her so that we could be together all the time. I would fall asleep sated, exhausted and yet emotionally energized by sensations I'd never felt before.

I was beginning to have no doubt that I was meant to be with Lisa Riordan, that what was developing between us was genuine and inevitable. I had never been a big believer in fate but being with Lisa was changing that skepticism. She felt that our reuniting in this manner was predestined and every moment I spent with her was proving that prediction to be true.

When we fell asleep, I was spooning her, securing her naked form to me, absorbing her warmth and her spirit, knowing if I held her any closer, she would have been inside me. She had settled back into my embrace, her arm covering mine, our fingers intertwined, our legs tangled and our hearts beating in the same rhythm. My mother was wrong about being in an airplane - *this* was as close to heaven as I was ever going to get.

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We woke up at four in the morning to the sound of one of the dogs getting sick.

Eyes flying open, fully alert, Lisa raced out of bed to locate the poor dog and whatever pile or piles he deposited on the floor. That way she could do a spot analysis of what may have caused the greyhound's upset stomach and clean up the mess before either she or I got up and unexpectedly stepped in it. She returned a few minutes later and climbed back into bed, snuggling up to me.

"Who got sick?" I asked her, yawning.

"Oz. Looks like he ate part of one of my plants again but he seems fine now."

"Good." We resettled into our former positions and very shortly, we were both asleep again. I always wondered why no one invented an alarm clock that, when activated, had the sound of an animal puking. Nothing seemed to wake someone and get them out of bed faster than that

particular sound.

Three hours later we were awakened again by a ringing telephone. The sun was shining so that was another hint. Reaching over me, Lisa fumbled with the cordless receiver before finally getting it to her mouth. "Hello?" It was obvious she had been asleep. "Morning, Mother." She resumed her former position of being snuggled up to my back, giving my shoulder blade a few kisses while she listened to her mother drone on. "Well, she's lying." I guessed they must have been discussing Lesley. "We did not make her walk home, she chose to walk those last few miles...I'm sorry she can't walk today but it's not my fault...no, it isn't Hunter's fault, either." Visualizing Lesley covered in mud yesterday made me laugh silently and Lisa responded to my body shaking with a light slap. "She was drunk, that's why we didn't bring her back to the church. Yes, she was, Mom, she was drunk, *again*, and you can't tell me you didn't notice. We were doing her a favor by bringing her home...Yes, actually she's right here...Yes, Mother, she spent the night." Lisa sighed in annoyance. "Why is it that Lesley being obviously falling-down-drunk in public is more acceptable to you than my spending time with Hunter?" Her voice was getting more clear and angrier as the phone call continued. "Mom. Mom? Mother! I'm not having this conversation with you. I'm tired of it. Keep pushing me on this issue and just maybe you'll push me right out of here and to California with her!"

My eyes snapped open and I know I stopped breathing. Was she saying that just to get a rise out of her mother or did she mean it? I turned in place and looked at her, my eyes searching her face for a clue. I could tell she was pissed off by the tone of her voice but there was a softness in her eyes when they engaged mine. I reached over and cupped the side of her face, my thumb lightly rubbing her cheek.

"Yeah, Mom, I *would* do that." She smiled at me. "She would be worth giving up everything for." I raised up on my elbow, leaned over and gave her a silent kiss on the cheek I had just been caressing. "Well, it's my life so it's ultimately my decision, isn't it?" Green eyes blinked up at me, lovingly. "I don't consider it throwing my life away. I'm in love with her. I always have been." I laid back down and she sat up. I could hear her mother ranting, even though I couldn't understand what she was saying. "Mom? We're done talking about this...Tonight? Nope, I have plans." I ran my fingers gently up and down her back. "Okay. I'll give Aunt Bethany a call. Bye." She pushed the off button and tossed the phone down to the bottom of the bed. "She drives me fucking nuts sometimes!" Lisa vented. She then went back to cuddling against me

"So...uh...what you were saying to her...about going back to California with me and giving up everything you have here...were you serious?"

She tightened her grip on my waist, her head snuggled on my shoulder. "I'm serious about being with you. Just how we're going to accomplish that is something we're going to have to discuss."

"Did you say that stuff to her just to get her going?"

"Initially. Funny though, the minute it left my mouth, it didn't sound like such a bad idea."

I put both my arms around her and squeezed. "Do you really think you're *in* love with me?"

"I know I am." She said it with such finality, it literally made my heart lurch in my chest.

I wanted to stay on this subject but it was almost too overwhelming. I kissed the top of her head. "Why doesn't your mother like me?"

The segue didn't seem to bother her. "I don't know. I guess because Lesley always lied about your responsibility in the antics involving you two back in high school."

"Lesley told me the night of your party that she 'fessed up to all that," I protested.

"Lesley lies, Hunter. She lies a lot. She never let our mother believe anything different than you were the troublemaker who got Lesley detention and suspended and drunk and whatever bad thing Les did in high school, you were to blame. And then I would always defend you and that would make her angry, too. I think she recognized way back then that my feelings for you were a little more than what she felt they should have been." She kissed the base of my throat. "Then when you left and it got around that your mother kicked you out and, basically, disowned you, that's all she needed to hear to confirm her suspicions that you really were, in her words, a 'bad seed'."

I shook my head. "This is one of the big reasons I can't stay here, Lisa...because a majority of the people here are not like you and Sam and Trina, they're like Dane and Lesley and your parents and my mother."

"I know it wouldn't be easy. It hasn't been easy, trust me, but -"

I rolled over on her and quieted her with a kiss. "Can we talk about this later?"

"Sure." Her eyes held a vulnerability I had not previously seen before. "As long as we *do* talk about it."

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After cooking us a very nice breakfast, Lisa made a phone call to her Aunt Bethany while I played fetch with Oz and Deke in the backyard. They were very cool dogs, very fast and eager to please. They took to me immediately and I suddenly felt like their Alpha figure...until Lisa walked out into the yard and then I no longer existed.

"It's a beautiful day," she stated, squinting. "Why don't we take the boys over to Evergreen Ridge and go for a hike?"

"You know," I reached for her hand and she took it, standing in front of me, "I would love to go anywhere with you but spending time in a forest is like a busman's holiday for me."

She grinned. "I know. I just thought you might like to look over the 'office' you might be working in."

I touched her nose and tapped it a few times. "Or...when we get to L.A., you can do all the hiking you want with a personal escort."

She put her arms around me. "Okay, what do you want to do this afternoon?"

"Watch football?"

She perked up. "You like football?"

"I love football."

"Who's your team?"

"Not the Patriots," I laughed, wondering if that would upset her. Most New Englanders were die hard Patriot fans, almost to the point of rabid loyalty.

"Why not the Patriots?" She didn't sound indignant, which indicated they weren't her team, either.

"I had a falling out with a friend once who ate, drank, slept and breathed the Patriots. She was obnoxious about it, especially after the falling out. So now, I don't care who plays, as long as they beat the Patriots."

"Then I would suggest you don't go watch any games at any of the bars from here to Maine."

"Well, that's good because I don't want to watch football at a bar. I want to stay home and watch it with you."

She kissed me between my breasts and looked up at me. "I like that. Calling where ever we are together 'home!'" We walked hand-in-hand to her back door. "I need to go over to my aunt's tonight for about an hour or so. Ever since their store got broken into last year, even though they have an alarm system, they don't leave the place unoccupied. Usually my cousin is there but he has something going on and my aunt and uncle also have to go somewhere."

"So you just have to babysit the place for an hour?"

"I told her I would. I know they're paranoid but it gives them peace of mind. Besides, it's only an hour, it won't interrupt our evening. Do you want to go with me?"

"Sure," I shrugged.

I couldn't believe her father's sister and brother-in-law still owned that little general store. It was a corner 'Mom and Pop' shop that served a lower middle-class neighborhood. Lesley and I used to get our beer there. We'd visit her cousin, Tommy, and when the store was closed in the evenings and when her aunt and uncle were busy watching TV or napping in their chairs, we'd

sneak downstairs into the store and grab a six-pack or two. And then, with Tommy as the referee, we'd play this silly little game where one of us would sit in the shopping cart and pull items off the shelf and into the cart onto us, as the other would push the cart as fast as possible through the aisles. Then we would put everything back and switch. The object was to see who could get the most in the cart and pile it the highest. I really missed that person who used to be my best friend. Regardless of who she blamed for our escapades.

One of my favorite stories involving that store was of Lisa's Aunt Bethany's mother-in-law, Mrs. Cioffi. She was a colorful (to say the least) woman who emigrated directly from Sicily and settled with her husband and four young children in the unlikely town of Otter Falls. One of those children grew up and married Bethany Riordan and bought a little corner market in a neighborhood that was always a mildly risky place to live. Yet, until last year, there was never any incident of crime surrounding the small family business and they probably had Mrs. Cioffi to thank for that.

She would sometimes run the cash register when no one else was available and they only left her alone in the store when absolutely necessary. This happened because she was a petite and frail-looking woman whose grasp of the English language was sketchy, at best, and someone they assumed to be a crime victim waiting to happen. But there were several witnesses when a neighborhood punk, who obviously was under the same misconception, entered the store, wielding a knife and approached Mrs. Cioffi and said, "This is a stick-up!" To which she responded by grabbing the broom and beating him with it all the way out the door while screaming, "Stick-a this uppa you ass!"

He never came back and there was no retaliation. After that, there were no further incidents of any problems in the store. Until last year when Mrs. Cioffi died and a week later, the store was broken into and burglarized. The perpetrator was still at large but the first person I might have looked at as a suspect would have been the humiliated wannabe robber all those years ago.

It would be interesting to see the store again and the massive three-story apartment that was over it. Tommy Cioffi, their cousin, had some hellacious parties on that third floor, in which the entire space was a huge recreation room. It would be good to see 'Aunt Bethany and Uncle Gino,' too. Hopefully Lisa's mother hadn't already poisoned them against me.

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Lisa wanted to take the dogs for a nice, leisurely walk before we left them alone the rest of the day, so we put them both in their different colored nylon harnesses, hooked them up to their retractable leashes and made our way up the street. She was being led by Deke and I had the pleasure of being walked by Oz. They seemed very excited to be out of the confines of their home and yard, sniffing every tree, bush and blade of grass along the sidewalk, peeing indiscriminately on pretty much anything stationery and upright, searching for either the perfect place to poop or the perfect pile of shit to roll in. A trip around the block which should have taken twenty minutes, took at least forty.

It reminded me of a joke I'd heard where a lawyer was cross-examining a witness in a murder

case and the lawyer said, *"So you were walking your dog on Main Street the night in question when you found the body, correct?"* and the witness answered in the affirmative and the prosecutor then asked, *"And during your walk, did you stop anywhere?"* The witness looked at him incredulously and said, *"Have you ever taken a dog for a walk?"*

Despite the frequent stops, it was a pleasant way to spend an hour. Lisa's interaction with her 'boys' was just one more thing I found endearing about my new girlfriend. Their mutual devotion to each other was clear and her gentleness with them was not without its firm edge resulting in them minding well. Unless they were severely distracted.

While we were walking, Lisa was updating me on the town square renovations over the past years. I was so enthralled by just listening to the enthusiastic and melodic tone of her voice when she animatedly described the changes, I hadn't noticed that Oz had slowly pulled away from me until I felt a slight tug on the handle, indicating that his leash was extended as far as it could go. Both Lisa and I looked up just in time to see the brindle-colored greyhound shove his narrow nose into the crack of a woman's ass and lift her a couple inches off the ground.

"Oz!" I yanked the leash back while pressing the retractor button, as Lisa hurried to the victim, with Deke tightly heeled.

The young woman was dressed in black leather pants, which looked to be held up by a belt made from pairs of handcuffs linked together. Real handcuffs, not decorative, designer ones that might have been able to be purchased at Hot Topic. She was wearing spiked dog collar and had the image of a BDSM Rights emblem shaved into the back of her closely cropped blonde head, tinted with the black, blue and white stripes and the red and white Triskelion. That should have been red flag number one. When we reached the woman, she had turned around, looking less startled and actually began to smile almost seductively at the puzzled dog who had so vigorously goosed her. That should have been red flag number two.

"I'm so sorry," Lisa apologized profusely, mortified by Oz's action. "He's never done anything like that before, he's normally very well behaved..."

"Oh no," she flicked her wrist, flopping her hand downward, dismissively. "He's fine. He must smell my great dane."

Lisa opened her mouth to reply but closed it when...well, there just didn't seem to be any diplomatic response to that statement. As the woman waved and strolled away from us toward town, Lisa and I looked at each other. "What did she mean?" she asked, though I really don't think she wanted an answer.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I can only hope that means she's sleeping with Brigitte Nielsen or Dolph Lundgren."

"I think he's Swedish," she offered.

We both watched the woman, who was waiting to cross the street. Seeing someone dressed like

that, so unabashedly displaying her bondage proclivities would never have raised an eyebrow had I still been in Los Angeles. But here, in Otter Falls, it was quite the sight to behold. "Where do you think she's going dressed like that first thing in the morning?"

"Church?"

I stared at Lisa. "Where? Our Lady of Dungeons?"

"As long as it's not the animal shelter, she can worship wherever she likes."

"My...Otter Falls sure has changed..." I honestly had nothing against anyone who practiced any of the Bs, Ds, Ss or Ms and I would be lying if I said I hadn't dabbled in a few of the domination and restraint plays myself. It was just too mind-boggling, though, to think someone in this little town would be either so courageously or ignorantly blatant about such a misunderstood fetish.

Reaching over, I took Lisa's hand in mine. I thought she might balk, being that we were in public and in her neighborhood. Even though she was fully out, there were still some lines that needed to be stepped over carefully for safety reasons but, without hesitation, she just squeezed my fingers.

I just figured that if someone about half my age had the guts to be who she really was, regardless of what that meant, why should I let outdated protocol stop me from engaging in a simple ritual that even the most basic teenager was allowed to do - hold my girlfriend's hand.

We strolled the rest of the way back to Lisa's joined at the fingers and talked about how we were going to teach the dogs not to poke their noses where they didn't belong.

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When we got back to my mom's, we went through the house, making a list of what needed to be done. My initial plan was to contact my mother's chosen real estate agent in the morning and discuss my options. I could tell Lisa was disappointed in that decision but she remained silent. I could not stay back here indefinitely and I needed to move forward with whatever I was going to do with this house and the property.

And yet, I could not reconcile the sense of panic I felt at the thought of us not being together. Lisa had put a spell on me that I never wanted her to break.

The in-depth checklist and surface inventory took us over two hours and when we were done, I was satisfied with the game plan. I think Lisa believed that just because I was more than likely going to sell this place didn't mean I couldn't settle down with her at her house if she didn't end up in California with me.

We then grabbed a beer and some munchies and planted ourselves in front of the television to watch the Minnesota Vikings play the Detroit Lions. I took the Vikings and she took Detroit and we made a friendly little sexual wager, the winner, of course, being rewarded with a night of

fantasies fulfilled. Which was really no different than any other night we had spent together so far.

During half-time, Sam called and we set up a dinner date for Tuesday night and decided on an acceptable menu for all. Our contribution would be the wine and dessert. I was fine with buying something but Lisa insisted on baking a pie of some sort. I didn't want to tell her that I rarely ate pie, except maybe a slice of pumpkin at Thanksgiving (but only with whipped cream), or that I almost never ate dessert but then I remembered that it wouldn't be for me, it was actually a gesture of appreciation for being included and so easily accepted.

I also realized that Dane was being abnormally quiet for someone who seemed to thrive on causing trouble. I was sure something was brewing, that he had something up his sleeve and I guessed I would have to wait to find out just what it was. As long as it didn't involve harming Lisa in any way, I knew I could handle it. But if he had any brains at all, he would have already figured out that Lisa would be a weakness of mine. Although one would think he would also have to realize that any manner of attack on her might just send me into a homicidal frenzy. He should also bear in mind, before he attempted anything, what I represented and the privileged information I had that could result in his political downfall. It was definitely his move but he needed to be his most calculating to pull anything off successfully without it backfiring and ruining him instead.

My Aunt Cissy, Uncle David's widow, also called and asked when she and 'the kids' were going to see me. We spoke briefly of Mom and thankfully, she wasn't overly solicitous but then, she knew firsthand the results of my mother's actions and behavior toward me. I told her that I would call her back sometime tomorrow to make definite plans with her. My aunt was a kind woman and I now wished I had been better at keeping in touch with her and my cousins. Maybe I could make amends.

After the game, where Detroit spanked Minnesota (poor me, I lost the bet), we returned to Lisa's and made sure the dogs were fed, watered, exercised and given tons of attention. We then went to dinner at Applebee's, gratefully, not running into anyone I knew personally or we knew together. However, Lisa was greeted by several acquaintances and I was introduced as her *friend*. which was said with such an intimacy to her tone, only the most dense of individuals would not have interpreted that as meaning something much more. But then I was in Otter Falls...people only heard what they wanted to, what didn't attack their personal comfort zones.

I just couldn't understand how Lisa could be happy here.

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15.

Bethany and Gino Cioffi were very happy to see me, gave their condolences about my mother, and we briefly reminisced before they left for their evening out. We were supposed to be there maybe a little over an hour before Tommy came home and relieved us of duty. Tommy was recently divorced and had moved back to his parents' home so that he could get back on his feet.

It would be good to see him, too. 'Aunt' Bethany made the statement (with a humorous lilt) that she had always hoped Tommy would find a *spirited* girl just like me to marry...with one obvious exception, of course. Maybe, if I had been straight, I would have gone after him because he was quite the handsome heartthrob in high school but as I admired the gorgeous blonde by my side, I was glad I was destined to be with innies and not outies. 'Uncle' Gino winked at Lisa and told us that at least *somebody* in the family ended up with me, a comment that made us both blush and provoked a jab in the side from his wife.

After Lisa's aunt and uncle left and following a tour of the refurbished apartment, Lisa and I ventured down into the closed store, deciding to keep the lights off as the street lights outside provided enough brightness for me to see that nothing had changed with the quaint interior. She deactivated the alarm system and we walked around, sharing memories of separate and collective good times there.

"You know," Lisa began, with a hint of impishness in her tone, "I always wanted to play that game that you and Lesley use to play with the shopping cart."

Laughing, I shook my head. "We were lucky we didn't break anything in the store or injure anything on our bodies. And Lesley always used to accuse Tommy of cheating in my favor because she said he was hot for me."

"He was. It made me insanely jealous thinking you might actually end up with him."

I studied her briefly. "Really? You had no idea about me back then?"

"Only what was wishful thinking. I thought if you were a lesbian, Lesley would know and that would have been the end of your friendship."

"But...she didn't act like that back then. The only reason I didn't say anything was that I didn't think she could keep it to herself."

"She wouldn't have, believe me. And the only reason she seemed to act so differently in high school was that she went through a phase where she knew going against the grain would get her noticed."

"So all her defense that one day of Joey Lassiter where she stood up to everybody was bullshit?"

"Remember all the kids that made fun of Joey? Remember the guy she really liked at the time, Ryan Machain?"

"Yeah?" I wondered what one had to do with the other.

"Remember how he was all into political correctness and was heading a student committee against high school bullies?"

"Ah, so she did it just to get his attention." Why didn't I know that about her?

"Yep but they only went out once. He found out what a liar and a phony she was."

She told me she didn't go out with him again because he was dull. "Jesus, did I really know her at all?"

"Probably as well as anyone. You knew exactly what she wanted you to know."

I was really jarred. Had I been so wrapped up in my own world of secrets and hurt that I never saw Lesley for who she really was? Or was I just as guilty as everyone else of seeing only what I wanted to see? I felt Lisa tugging on my sleeve which nudged me out of my momentary self-scrutiny and I looked at her.

Her eyes were sparkling in the darkness, reflecting the limited light that was sneaking into the store. Once again, she took my breath away. "Kiss me."

She didn't have to say it twice. I pulled her to me, sooner than she expected me to, startling her, and I hungrily covered her mouth with mine. She unleashed the animal inside me and I wanted to devour her right there in front of the huge wall-length, clear glass window that faced the street. We probably stayed lip-locked, on display for anyone who walked by and really wanted to look in and see, longer than we should have. I didn't care, though, I could have stood there, kissing her all night. As it was, she had to gently push me away, breaking the kiss.

"God, Hunter," she gasped. "I can't believe how damned weak in the knees you make me."

"Yeah? Just wait until later," I promised.

"Braggart," she grinned, slowly backing away from me.

"Yep, I am. And you know I can make good on it, too." I walked toward her. "How much more time do we have before Tommy's expected?"

"About a half-hour. Why?" An expectant, sensuous grin played on her lips. "Just what do you have in mind?"

"This." I grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up, dumping her in a shopping cart, butt first, so that just her arms, legs, shoulders and head stuck over the top. She was laughing so hard, after her initial struggling, she couldn't have stopped me if she tried. "Ready?" She nodded and I made a speedy trial run up and down each aisle, getting the feel of pushing the car with the balanced weight. "Okay...we do it for real this time. I'll bring you close to the shelves and you have to put into the cart and on top of you as much as you can with your hands. We'll go through once and then turn around and hit the other side of the aisle on the way back. Then I bring you up to the cash register, which is the finish line. Then it's my turn. Since Tommy's not here to ref, we'll have to judge - honestly - who has the most. Anything knocked on the floor and not in the cart doesn't count."

She was still giggling. "I can't believe you guys used to do this all the time."

"It was fun. Putting everything back on the shelves sucked but it was worth the once a month competition. Ready?" I was standing still, pushing the cart out then pulling it back to me.

She put her hand up and pointed forward. "Let's do it."

And, with that, I raced her around the store as she swept anything and everything within reach into the cart and onto her midsection. By the second time around the store, the cart was getting a lot heavier than I remembered it getting in the past. I needed to start working out my arms and legs more. She had cans and other items piled on her pretty high by the time we reached the cash register.

"God, I can't move! This was so much fun. I didn't realize -"

We both stopped dead when we saw the patrol car spotlight shine in the window, directly on Lisa. "Uh oh," was all I could seem to manage. We watched the officer exit her car, putting her baton in its holder and key the mic clipped to her uniform epaulet, probably calling in her location. Her approach to the front door of the store was not aggressive nor threatening, her hand nowhere near her holster.

"It's Kim Fredette, shit!" Lisa said, her voice hushed and a little panicked.

"You know her?" I scrunched down behind the cart as the officer switched on her maglite.

"Yes. She's always asking me out. You know her, too. She used to play center for St. James."

"Kim Ligouri?" She was the girl I used to make out with after the games in a deserted part of the gym. I did not want to see her, even after all these years. The last time we were together, I had agreed to go 'all the way' with her the next time we were supposed to meet and then I panicked and avoided her until I left the area. Fortunately, she attended a rival school which was thirty miles away from Otter Falls, so she was never in town where I had to worry about running into her at every turn.

Flashing her light through the window in the glass door, she illuminated Lisa, obviously recognizing her and knocked on the metal frame with her flashlight.

"Hunter, let her in," I heard Lisa command, her voice still quiet.

Let her in? I didn't even want her to see me, which is why I stayed hidden behind the cart. I was hoping Kim would acknowledge that one of the town's most prominent lawyers was trapped in a shopping cart, in front of a cash register in a fully stocked, dark store, after hours, with probably a hundred dollars worth of groceries piled high on top of her and then leave.

Kim knocked again. "Lisa? What's going on?"

"I'm okay, Kim," Lisa hollered out to the obviously more than confused woman in uniform.  
"Hunter, let her in," Lisa said, in an urgent whisper.

I remained frozen in place. No, no, no, no, why me? Why Kim? Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Hunter!" That was a bark. *"Let her in!"* That was a hiss.

Kim's knocking had turned to pounding and Lisa reached her hand behind the cart and grabbed a fistful of my hair. "Ow, owowowowow, all right!" I slowly stood up, an action that made Kim take a step back and her hand automatically hovered above the butt of her 9mm.

"It's okay, Kim, Hunter's going to let you in," Lisa announced as I put both my hands up, level with my shoulders and walked to the door. I was hoping that maybe I could let her in, Lisa would have a friendly little chat with her and she'd let us both off the hook without even finding out my name. But Lisa shot that in the ass. There weren't that many women in the world named Hunter and I knew, her hearing that and then seeing my face and height, she would put two and two together and I'd have some 'splainin' to do.

It didn't matter that it was sixteen years ago and we were merely horny teenagers. Lesbians had it all over elephants when it came to never forgetting.

She raised her maglite and shined it in my face as I unlocked the door. Once the green and purple spots disappeared, I saw her smirking. "Well, well, well...if it isn't Hunter Roberge. That still is your last name isn't it?"

"Yep. Hi Kim." I closed the door behind her.

She gave me a shameless once over, then turned to Lisa. "Counselor," she acknowledged.

"Sergeant," Lisa returned the titled courtesy, embarrassed to the point of almost glowing in the dark.

I noticed the three chevrons on her sleeve as she returned her full attention to me. "Sorry to hear about your mother," she said, while practically leering.

"Thanks."

"Is that what brought you to town?" She had not changed much. She was still as tall as I was, still thin, still androgynous, still had piercing hazel eyes and a way that she curled her lip on one side that I found quite sexy when I used to get all hot and sweaty with her on and off the basketball court. I wondered if her kisses were still sloppy.

"Yes, it is." I would only share more information under duress and maybe not even then.

"How long are you staying?" Her tone and demeanor reflected that she was still very interested.

Lisa, obviously realizing we had some kind of history, cleared her throat to get our attention. "Uh...does someone want to help me out of this cart?"

Kim turned back to her as I walked over and started removing the items from the cart, placing them on the counter. "Would either of you like to tell me what's going on here?" Kim asked.

"Any way of getting out of it?" I asked, as Lisa clasped my arm and pulled herself to her feet while I held the cart so it wouldn't tip. It took her a few minutes before she could fully straighten up.

"You're good at that, aren't you, Hunter? Getting out of things?" There was a acerbity in her words.

I loaded all of the groceries back into the cart as Lisa approached Kim and smiled. "We're watching my aunt's store until my cousin gets here and we were just having a little fun. We're authorized to be in here, so you don't have to do a report...right?" Her tone was amiable but professional. She was more urging than asking.

"Well...that depends..."

"On?" Lisa tilted her head, waiting for the blackmail.

I slowly moved behind Lisa and put my arm over her shoulder, crossing her chest, my hand coming to rest on her bicep, in a gesture that could have been interpreted as territorial. Okay, so it was blatantly territorial and Kim's eyes widened, especially when Lisa's fingers curled around my forearm. She got the message. There was a challenging look in my eyes and Kim raised her hand in concession, smiling.

She shook her head. "Figures." She keyed her mic. "Lincoln eight to base, code four at this location." When she received a 'ten-four' in response, she studied us both, still smirking. "I got a call that someone reported suspicious activity at this location. Must have been whatever the hell you were doing in that cart." When Lisa opened her mouth to explain, Kim put her hand up again. "I don't want to know. I figured whoever was in here belonged because the alarm didn't go off. Then I get here and find the cutest couple in town doing...something...Anyway, as long as I don't get any further complaints from the Cioffis, I only have to log this as a baseless call I responded to."

"Thank you, Kim," Lisa told her, sincerely. When I was silent, she subtly elbowed me.

"Oof. Thanks, Kim," I added.

"If I was a different type of person, I could threaten to report this as a 10-59 and then hold it over your heads until you bartered with me. And, even though you've turned me down several times, Counselor," she said to Lisa, "and you owe me, Hunter, I'm not the kind of person who abuses her authority like that."

"Thank you, Kim," Lisa repeated, sweetly.

I was a little incredulous. "Owe you? Jesus, Kim, that was a lifetime ago and you would actually call this malicious mischief? By what stretch of the imagination? It's certainly mischief but there's nothing malicious about -" Another poke to the ribs. " -Oof. Thank you, Kim."

"I don't forget people who back out on agreements, Hunter. Not when they look like you, anyway. It doesn't matter when it happened, just that it did happen. And how do you know what a 10-59 is? Don't tell me you're a cop, too..."

"I'm a park ranger."

She nodded. "Nice. Okay. I need to get back on patrol. Ladies, it was good seeing you again. Wish I was meeting both of you under different and separate circumstances but them's the breaks, huh? Stay out of trouble." She stepped to the door and opened it and turned back to me.

"If...uh...things don't work out with you two, give me a call."

"Thank you, Kim," I recited, a fake smile plastered on my face, locking the door once she was outside. I turned to come face to face with amused, questioning eyes.

"Something you'd like to share with the class?" Her arms were folded across her chest.

"Hey, Lisa! You down there?" Saved by Tommy. "Hey, Hunter, you with her?"

"Yeah, we're both here," I answered.

We heard him come bounding down the stairs. "Where's the girl who launched thousands of my wet dreams?"

"Charming," Lisa commented, laughing, shaking her head. She looked out at Kim, sitting in her patrol car, entering this call on her log. "Seems like you launched quite a few wet dreams back then."

Oh, I was really going to have some 'splainin' to do when we got back to my mother's.

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16.

Tommy had changed. He was partially bald and he had a beer gut and love handles that hung over his belt, giving him that 'muffin top' look. He had gone from resembling his mother to being a clone of his father, including the thick, bushy mustache. He still had eyes that smiled and a grin that charmed and a hug that crushed. He was one of the few people who could actually lift me off the ground when he hugged me.

After he gave Lisa's shoulder a quick squeeze and gushed about how good he thought I looked,

he noticed the cans in the shopping cart. "Oh, man! You guys played shelf sweep without me? You couldn't have waited?"

"It was kind of spontaneous," Lisa told him.

"Want to play again?" He asked, enthusiastically, bouncing up and down on his heels like a little kid.

"Uh...no," I said, looking out the window as Kim's squad car made a u-turn in front of the store and sped off toward downtown.

He helped us return everything to the shelves and we went back up stairs to catch up on each other's lives. Thanks to Lisa's parents, he was aware of my orientation and other than his 'what a loss' comment, he seemed very okay with it. He also stated that if his beautiful cousin had to be a lesbian, he wished she'd end up with someone like me. I hadn't realized his family genuinely liked me as much as they did. It warmed my heart.

There were some good people in this town. It was unfortunate they had to be so few and far inbetween.

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"You used to make out with Kim Fredette!?"

We were on our way back to my mother's. Lisa was driving and I had just explained to her about Kim's cryptic statements earlier. "She was Kim Ligouri back then and yes. She was safe. She was obvious. She didn't live in town." Lisa was silent, absorbing all this. "Would it help if I said she was a lousy kisser?"

"So why did you keep meeting up with her?"

I shrugged. "Practice?"

She laughed, slapping at my arm. "That's terrible."

"It's true. Why is her last name Fredette now? She couldn't have got married..."

"Well, actually, she did."

"To a man?" I stared at Lisa, surprised.

"Yes. To a man. And they had a kid. They were divorced the year after her daughter was born." She glanced at my face, which must have looked totally blank because I was dumbfounded. Kim Ligouri? Had sex with a man? And had a baby? I was expecting the sky to start falling any minute. Lisa returned her attention to the road. "Don't ask me. I'm not that close to her to know all the dirty little details of her life." Then she glanced at me again, smirking. "Obviously."

"Hey, we just kissed and felt around a little bit, that's all."

"But she wasn't your first?"

"No. That's why she's still pissed. I told her I would and then I...didn't."

"Why didn't you?"

I sighed. "I got scared."

"You? I didn't think you were afraid of anybody."

"We're all afraid of somebody." I glanced out the window. "I didn't want her to be my first."

"So...she wasn't your first. Who was? Anyone I know?"

I snickered. She'd never believe it. "Maybe. Who was your first? Anyone I know?"

"I wanted it to be you." She pulled into the drive way and shut off the car. "And, beside, I asked you first."

I unhooked my seat belt and waved her off. "You probably don't remember her. She left Otter Falls not too long before I did. She was older. Thirty."

"And you were eighteen?"

"Yeah. Late bloomer, I know. You?"

"My first was older, too. She was thirty-three. I was seventeen. It happened at a retreat my parents insisted I go to up near Plattsburg. Actually, she used to live in Otter Falls but I didn't know her then. Very alluring, very persuasive. She was married, though, and that always bothered me." There was a melancholy tone to her voice I found puzzling.

"Mine was married, too."

"So, come on, who was it?"

I reached over and rested my hand on her shoulder. "It was the minister's wife. From the First Congregational Church. Jennifer -"

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "Visson?" I didn't like the look in her eyes.

"Yes. Why?"

"I don't believe this..." She looked stunned.

"Oh, no...you are kidding me. She was not your first..." I was undergoing a sudden kaleidoscope of emotions, the strongest of which seemed to be anger. Jennifer Visson was a predator. I had realized that after I had gotten older and looked back on the experience. Although, I enjoyed the time I spent with her in bed and was appreciative of her personal instruction, I knew she really wasn't a nice person. And now to find out that she also 'busted' Lisa, a silent storm began raging inside me. It was a surprisingly coincidental link but a sexual connection I wish we didn't share. Knowing how Jennifer was with virgins, I could visualize exactly what they had done that first time and picturing Lisa in her clutches was almost too much for me.

"Yeah, she was," she confirmed, quietly.

"Huh." I nodded. "Why don't we go inside and talk about this."

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Lisa and I sat on the couch, her tight against my side, my arm around her, discussing Jennifer Visson and our first times. This was a development about which I could not seem to reconcile my feelings. I had foolishly hoped that Jennifer had learned her lesson with me by getting caught and barely escaping having her family scandalized and her husband's reputation ruined. Obviously not.

After the Vissons left Otter Falls, they moved to just outside Plattsburg, New York. Jennifer began helping out at a Christian retreat near Saranac Lake, a camp that Lisa was ordered to attend by her parents the summer she was seventeen. By that age, Lisa had come out to her mother and father and, apparently, everyone else and Mrs. Riordan thought she, personally, would never survive the 'disgrace' of it all. Insisting that all Lisa needed was to examine her spiritual priorities and deepen her relationship with God, the Riordans sent their youngest daughter to a week long religious camp that focused on reawakening faith to the 'lost.' Lisa said it wasn't a gay rehabilitation center because if there were any other homosexuals there, she didn't come into contact with them. In fact, most of the attendees were housewives sent there by their husbands to try and find their way back to the 'obey' part of their marriage vows.

She said she was very vocal about her orientation which resulted in no one wanting to share a room with her...well, except for this one lecherous maintenance man who was positive he could 'change' her. Within a day, the news reached Jennifer, the aptly titled 'activities director', who volunteered to personally 'guide' her. Lisa then told me that although she was very attracted to Jennifer, her aggressive pursuit unnerved her and she resisted her until her last night there when she went back to her room and found Jennifer, naked, in her bed. Seemed Jennifer had a routine.

I asked Lisa why, if Jennifer was her first experience, she didn't have a vaginal orgasm as that was one of Jennifer's specialties. Lisa explained that although they did 'everything,' when Jennifer entered her, it was with a dildo and not with her fingers, that maybe if that hadn't been so uncomfortable and maybe if she hadn't bled and panicked a little, things would have progressed to that point. But when Lisa expressed hesitation about going forward with any more 'activities,' Jennifer became impatient and annoyed with her and left, making what should have

been a rewarding and fond memory, a confusing and disenchanting one.

After sharing my Jennifer Visson story, we went upstairs and crawled into bed. Initially, we just held each other. I was too disturbed to concentrate on anything else. I really wanted to find Jennifer and take her to task, not just for avoiding any responsibility for my situation but for preying on virgins, having to be their very first, an unhealthy obsession that left casualties in its wake. She was a seductive package and she knew it, knew that no curious and willing girl in her right mind would turn down an offer to have an experienced, sexy woman 'show her the ropes.' The problem seemed to be, however, that Jennifer had moved on to not caring if they were willing or not, she would wear her victim down to get what she wanted. And the girls had started getting younger.

When it was just me, I thought it was pretty cool to tell people that I had been seduced by a minister's wife, leaving out, of course, what resulted from getting caught. But finding out that Lisa was nailed by the same woman put an entirely different spin on it and I suddenly realized the bigger picture wasn't so cool. Maybe if my mother had talked or I had said something to someone, the threat of negative publicity for the Vissons and the church may have prompted counseling or sanctions of some sort. Not that I would have wanted anything bad to happen to her at the time because I was too infatuated to think clearly but severe action then may have put the reins on Jennifer's overactive libido. Or, at least, perhaps made her equate humiliatingly harsh consequences with her selfishly lascivious choices. Jennifer would have been forty-six now. I wondered if she was still on the prowl and what lines she may have crossed over the last thirteen years since Lisa.

Lisa's encounters since then had been much more pleasant, not that her night with Jennifer had been horrible because she was quick to say that the sex, itself, was enlightening and definitely fulfilling, with the exception of the upsetting penetration part. Jennifer's behavior following that was a recollection that she did not treasure too much and she admitted that she cried herself to sleep after Jennifer left, feeling very used and, well, *sordid*.

It didn't matter that it was thirteen years after the fact, my heart broke for her. She deserved a better first time.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lisa's soft voice broke through my preoccupation as her warm hand made gentle circles on my ribcage. Her head was on my chest and my arm was around her shoulder. When I didn't answer right away, she said, "You know a person's heart rate speeds up when they are thinking angry thoughts. Yours is pounding like a trip-hammer."

"I can't stop thinking about Jennifer and how I wish I had her in front of me right now."

"Right now?" She lifted her head and looked at me, grinning. "I think this would be the *last* place you'd want her right now." She raised an eyebrow.

That made me smile. "True. If she ever put her hands on you again..."

"Awww, my big, brave girlfriend is going to protect me. My big, brave girlfriend who hid behind

the grocery cart from the big, bad police officer." She reached up and pinched my cheek. "How cute is that?"

I took her hand and kissed it. "God, you are *such* a brat."

She climbed fully on top of me, my arms encircling her, keeping her in place. "You know, though...think about it. It's just one more thing to support my destiny theory. What are the odds that we would both lose our virginity to the same woman?"

"Well, knowing how Jennifer worked, I'd now say the odds were pretty damned good."

She began lightly kissing my face all over until her lips were hovering over mine. "I don't want to talk about her anymore."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't want to talk at all," she said before she rewarded me with a tender yet passionate kiss that eventually led to some very sweet, tempered lovemaking that lasted long into the night.

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The next morning something happened that I really didn't like. Lisa had to leave our warm bed to go to her house and get ready for work. No matter what amount of begging I did, she was relentlessly responsible.

How was I going to leave her to go back to California when I couldn't even bear when she left me to go to work? What was she doing to me? I was not like this, this was not me. I'd had prior relationships but none which ever reached this level of commitment and definitely not this fast. It made me wonder if we would burn out as quickly as we caught fire, something that often happened in my past. A woman would ignite my desire and we would start hot and heavy, the flame flickering out soon after and it was obvious there had really been nothing there but sexual attraction to begin with.

My longest relationship lasted just under a year and it was turbulent from the beginning. Yet that tempestuous aura that brought us together was ultimately what tore us apart. The constant head-butting of two strong women who never really had much in common except their gladiatorial nature was doomed to fail, despite how intensely stimulating the sex was. She was someone I still occasionally connected with when neither one of us were specifically dating anyone and we felt the need for some sexual companionship. We discovered we were much better at being fuck buddies than we were at being lovers. She was the last woman I had been with before Lisa.

Something about what was happening between Lisa and I was very different than anything I had ever experienced before with anyone. The completeness that she washed over me in her presence was only matched by the emptiness that held me hostage during her absence. I almost felt a little lost now that she wasn't with me. I didn't want to go as far to say that I was in love with her because the concept of falling in love with someone in four days just wasn't realistic to me. But

reality aside, as much as I tried to analyze and downplay my feelings for her, it always circled back to the 'in love' issue. In the past that would have scared the hell out of me but now, with this particular woman, I welcomed it with open arms. I adored everything about Lisa Riordan and I wanted her in my life 24/7 and I knew she felt the same. Now if we could only come to an accommodating agreement on just how we were going to accomplish that.

As I was showering, I was still stewing about the disclosure involving Jennifer Visson. If she lived closer, I would have confronted her. She was four years younger than I was now when she slept with me and only a year younger than I was now when she got Lisa. I could not fathom, at my age, targeting an eighteen-year-old or younger and I could only hope that she was still not luring young sapphic virgins into her (or someone's) bed at age forty-six.

I had no doubt she was still beautiful, was probably one of these women who just got better looking with age, and I was sure she used that to her advantage when preying on her victims. But all that added to her using her position of assumed authority and standing affiliation with a church to achieve some egotistically carnal goal was beyond appalling, it was reprehensible. Especially when she never stuck around long enough to deal with the consequences of her actions. It was deviant behavior like hers that gave the rest of us a bad name.

I suddenly wondered if I could track her down using the Internet or maybe start an online Jennifer Visson recovery group. Okay. I was becoming obsessed and I had to stop.

After feeding Orion, I poured myself a cup of coffee from a pot Lisa had brewed before she left. I retrieved the morning paper and glanced through all four, thin sections of The Otter Falls Daily News, zeroing in on the listed opened and closed court cases and the obituaries to see if I recognized any names. My mother's services were listed and I scanned for my name, spotting it. "One daughter, S. Hunter Roberge from Glendale, California," I read aloud. "Sam must have given the information to the paper." I then found my horoscope which advised me to look beneath the surface of the obvious, not everything was what it appeared to be. And that differed from any other day of my life how?

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17.

Returning to the house from delivering my mother's clothes to a very grateful battered women's shelter, where I promised them there would be another load in a couple days of some very out-of-style teenage clothes, I called my Aunt Cissy to see if I could stop by for a cup of coffee. She couldn't say yes fast enough.

I was looking forward to seeing her, to see how much she had changed. My aunt was a brave woman and one of great strength. I admired her greatly. She loved my Uncle David very much and losing him like she did and when she did was crippling yet she never let it show, other than shedding a few tears behind the closed door of the bedroom they had shared for thirty-six years. They had raised four kids and took me in without hesitation. Even though I only stayed with them for two months, it was an unnecessary disruption but she never once asked me why I was

there or made me feel like I did not belong. She opened her arms and her home to me and I felt ashamed that I had not kept in better touch.

Aunt Cissy knew whatever had happened between my mother and I was a very serious but a painfully private issue. Whether she had guessed about me or not, I didn't know. There was never any indication that she had and there were never any questions. My cousins also never implied that they had any inkling regarding my orientation. They were curious about what happened with my mother but when I refused to talk about it, the inquiries stopped. Whether my aunt or uncle instructed them to leave it be or not, I never found out. Maybe my visit with her today would give me more insight.

She was at the front door when I pulled into the driveway. I greeted her with a long, warm hug and she linked my arm with hers, pulling me inside. In the last seven years, either I had grown taller or she had grown shorter. A few more wrinkles, a few more pounds, several more white hairs but she was still my Aunt Cissy with the smiling eyes. Pouring me a large mug of coffee, she gestured to the kitchen table, on which there was a big mixing bowl and all the ingredients for the makings of chocolate chip cookies.

I glanced around. The kitchen looked the same, barring a few more knick-knacks, a different wall clock and a new refrigerator loaded with photo magnets of what I assumed were grandchildren. Before I sat down, I studied the pictures on the freezer door and below. "Wow. This one here looks just like Uncle David," I pointed out. "Is...good lord, is that Justin?"

She took a step closer and grinned, proudly. "Yes. He's sixteen now."

"Wow. That's amazing." We took a seat at the kitchen table, opposite each other. Shauna, my oldest cousin, was the third to get married but the first to have kids. It seemed like once she started, the three other siblings followed suit and my Aunt Cissy now had fourteen grandchildren. Justin was nine the last time I saw him and pretty devastated that his grandpa was gone. I got the lowdown on all my cousins, their spouses and whose children were whose from my aunt on the phone.

"Shauna gets home from work about two but has to be at a school conference by three-thirty and would like you to stop by, if you can."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"And remember I told you that Courtney works at her accounting business out of her house? She would also like to see you since she can't get to Shauna's before three..."

"...uh huh..." Oh, boy. This was going to turn into an all day venture. My two other cousins, Jeremy and Nicole, wanted to see me, too but they also had things going on and would be home at different times and even though they lived in separate sides of a duplex, they wouldn't be able to see me together. As much as I loved Sam, I wouldn't want him right next door to me but the family was very close, not just in their feelings for each other but also proximity, too, all living within eight blocks of each other. I was going to tell her that I didn't have to stop and see them

all in one day but it looked like she had already made the arrangements. Thankfully, I didn't have anything else going on until Lisa got out of work and who knew what the immediate future held so it made sense to visit with everyone today if I could.

We exchanged pleasantries and by my third swallow of coffee, Aunt Cissy got right down to business. "Now, Hunter, you don't need to tell me, you know that, but did your mother kick you out all those years ago because you're a lesbian?"

My eyes snapped open and I put the coffee mug down. "You guessed that about me, huh?"

"Honestly, no, I had no clue. Shauna's daughter, Lara, babysits for Lesley and Wally Melendy. She came home on Friday night very upset because Mrs. Melendy was saying terrible things about you to her. Calling you a pervert and unnatural and saying all kinds of disturbing things."

"Lesley knows who Lara is, then?" I was beginning to struggle internally with who I disliked more - Lesley or Dane.

"Oh, yes. Remember Shauna worked for Doug Riordan for two years before she got married. This is Otter Falls, Hunter, everybody knows everybody and everybody else's business. That has never changed. The only exception to that rule I can ever remember is what happened between you and your mother."

"Yes, Aunt Cissy. My mother threw me out because she found out I was a lesbian."

"That was it?" It was not a question of suspicion, as though I were holding out on her, it was more a statement of incredulity. She really didn't need to know the details because I didn't think that mattered at this point.

"That was it." I bowed my head. Even after all these years, it still stung. She reached over and gently put her hand on my wrist.

"Oh, sweetie. Your mother..." she shook her head. "You know your mom and I got along like oil and water, which is why we only tolerated each other at Christmas and weddings. I never told you the reason for that. But it was the way she treated you."

I looked up at her, startled. "Really?" Well, that was a surprise. I had always assumed it was because Uncle David was my father's brother and she didn't want anything to do with that side of the family.

"Yes. Really. I cannot tell you the fights your mother and I used to get into about you. You don't know how many times she told me to mind my own business. She never wanted to let you be who you were, never wanted you to develop your own personality. She didn't even want you to be the mini version of her. It was impossible to see *what* she wanted from you but if I couldn't figure it out and I'm an adult, there was no chance for you to figure it out."

"She didn't want me to be anything like my father."

"It would have been so much simpler if that had been it. But she tossed your father out when you were almost four. Her unreasonably harsh discipline of you started from the second you could understand the word 'no.' She always acted angry with you."

"She always was. I could never do anything right in her eyes. She would ask me to do something and I would do it and even though I had never done it before, she would go around right behind me, berating me every step of the way for doing it wrong. She used to say, 'can't you do *anything* right?' or 'if you aren't going to do it right the first time, why do it at all?' I just got to a point where I agreed with her and told her fine, I wouldn't do it then. But that, of course, got me in trouble, too. You know, just a little praise for trying would have been nice."

"Hunter, I don't know what was wrong with your mother as far as you were concerned but I think blaming your father was just a convenient excuse."

"So...you think she always hated me?" I looked up into her sympathetic gray eyes, hoping she would say no. It seemed okay for me to think it myself but if my aunt confirmed that she did, indeed, think my mother *really* hated me, that would instill a bitterness and a sadness in me I don't think I could ever get rid of.

"No, sweetie, I think she hated herself. For some reason, you were her outlet."

"Why would she hate herself? My mother was very beautiful, very lovely and seemingly very popular. She was a good mother and very well regarded in the community." Did I just say she was a good mother? Well, despite her treatment of me, my two brothers and I did grow up to be productive adults. I was an exemplary employee, quickly rising to the top of my field, keeping Bambi, Thumper and all their little friends safe. Sam was managing his father-in-law's prospering construction business, keeping it successfully afloat and making a name for himself in the entire state, not just regionally. And Dane...well, Dane, even though he seemed to live by his own set of rules, had made a name for himself in local politics and was a big deal at Mom's church. So, in that respect, she was a good mother, instilling some core work values that stayed with us.

"Hunter, I knew your mother before she married your dad. You know that she lived the typical young girl's dream being her junior and senior prom and homecoming queen, she was Miss Otter Falls and second runner up in the Miss Vermont pageant..."

"Yeah, I never heard the end of that."

"Nobody else did either. And do you know why? Because it's all she had to hang onto. It was the last time in her life when she was her own person, when she was in control of her life. Your father came along, this handsome man just out of the Navy, looking like a good catch and she thinks she's going to live the American dream with him."

"Instead, she lives the American nightmare," I finished for her.

She smiled, patiently, and stood up. "Not quite." She went to the sink and filled up a measuring cup with water and returned to the table. Starting to add brown sugar, then white sugar to the big bowl, she said, "To my knowledge your father never raised a hand to her, did he?"

"If he did, I didn't know about it. And believe me, I'm sure if he had, *that* would have been thrown up in my face, too."

"Then it wasn't quite the American nightmare." She looked up, watching me watch her prepare the dough. "They'll be done before you leave. I'll make sure you have some."

"Thanks, Aunt Cissy," I grinned, happily, feeling like a little kid again. "Can I maybe have some dough, too, before you use it all?" She looked at me, waiting. Then I remembered. "Please?" Jesus, I *was* a little kid again.

She laughed. "Courtney is always saying to me, 'Mom, I don't care how old I get, I come back into this house and I feel ten years old again.' I guess we parents always have a way of doing that, huh?" She returned to the subject of my mother. "Some of us tried to tell Sarah that she was making a mistake but she wouldn't listen. She was stuck on the fact that, together, she and your father were the perfect couple. I mean, yes, they looked fabulous together, like right out of a movie magazine, but he played her from the beginning. Your Uncle David talked to your father the night before the wedding, begged him to call it off. But, without going into details, your father wasn't about to give up your mother at that point."

"So you're saying it really was my father's fault my mother was the way she was?"

"Not at all. It was both their faults. Your father should have left her alone. Period. Devastatingly handsome, though he was, he was a scoundrel from the word go and your mother deserved better. So did you kids." She added the chocolate chips to her mix and continued to stir. "On the other hand, your mother should have been less focused on what other people thought or how it looked for her to be with anyone who had less than matinee idol looks. Appearances were everything with her and she tried to maintain that. Especially after your father left."

"And I never fit in with her standards of what was acceptable. I never heard the end of her disappointment because her life wasn't what I wanted, her pointed disbelief that I didn't have a date every weekend or a steady boyfriend or any of that stuff that was of no interest to me. There was never any let up of that *tone*, you know? The one that always said, *what's wrong with you? You're not good enough, you'll never measure up*. She ridiculed everything I did. Whatever it was, it was never right." The frustration in my voice was clear.

"Just because you didn't do it her way doesn't mean it wasn't right," Aunt Cissy stated, gently. "You were always a very pretty girl and you've grown into a stunning woman. You seem like a beautiful soul, too, sweetie. Why she never chose to recognize that, I'll never know. Why she chose to take her own personal failings out on you is something I'll never understand. Your brothers could get away with murder but you caught hell for everything." As a consoling gesture, she handed me a soup spoon full of cookie dough loaded with dark chocolate chips. Dropping the first batch on a cookie sheet, she popped them into the oven and brought the coffee pot over

to refill our mugs. "Your mother should never have disowned you because you happen to like women better than men. We have no control over that kind of stuff. Why, hell, if it was acceptable to be angry at my kids because of who they fell in love with, I wouldn't be speaking to three of them. If your grandmother followed that philosophy, she should have disowned your mother. I'm sure no woman you brought home to your mother would have been any worse than her bringing your father home to your grandmother."

She wasn't really telling me anything I didn't already know but it was nice to hear that someone else noticed it, too. It just validated my belief that I really wasn't a bad daughter. We spoke frankly about my mother and my father and I learned little tidbits of information that helped put together a clearer picture of why my childhood may have been so miserable.

Then she echoed the words that had us all perplexed. "So when your mother left you that house, that just shocked us all."

"I can honestly tell you that it shocked me the most. I still don't know why she did it, no one else seems to know, either, and I don't know if I will ever find out."

"Do you think she left you the house as, maybe, an apology?"

We both contemplated that idea for a moment and both shook our heads at the same time. "Nah, me either. I guess the only one who knows the answer to that is her."

After four cups of coffee, a half-dozen hot cookies and two hours of 'catch up' conversation, it was time to go. I wanted to head home and take a nap but there was no way I could fit that on my immediate schedule. Aunt Cissy filled a bag with a dozen more cookies and placed them on the table for me. I was just rinsing out my coffee cup in the sink when the doorbell rang.

"Hunter, sweetie, would you get that? I need to get this batch of cookies out of the oven."

"Sure," I told her as I grabbed another fresh, warm cookie off the cooling rack. I walked to the door and opened it to find a middle-aged woman standing there, holding a clipboard and a fistful of leaflets. She was a few inches shorter than I, full-figured, nicely dressed in a red pantsuit, but a little haggard-looking. She had shiny red hair pulled away from her face by a barrette, dark eyes, rosy red lips, rosy cheeks and an odd yellowish-colored nose. She reminded me of a life-sized Tickle Me Elmo. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Vicky Stancliff and I'm here to remind you to get out and vote next month and when you do, your vote for Dane Roberge for congress would be appreciated." She was about to hand me something with a photo of my brother's smug face on it when I leaned back away from the doorway.

"Aunt Cissy, are you going to vote for Dane next month?"

"Hell, no. The little turd doesn't deserve it," she called back.

I returned my attention to Vicky, looking a little uncomfortable. "Sorry. Not interested."

Before I could close the door, she said, "Maybe that's because you really don't know him."

I raised an eyebrow and looked at her, pointedly. "And how well do you know him...Vicky?"

"Oh, well, my husband has worked with him for the last two years. We think he's just what this town needs to represent it."

"Well, that woman in there? She's his aunt and she's known him for the last thirty-one years and she thinks if he gets elected, this town will be in deep bat guano. And her opinion is good enough for me."

She looked as though she were about to say something but I told her to have a nice day and closed the door on her. Following a promise to my aunt not be a stranger in her house, I took my bag of cookies and left to reconnect with my cousin, Shauna, then Nicole and Jeremy, then Courtney. Then home.

My cousins, and what I met of their families, were very glad to see me and the only time the issue of my orientation came up was when Shauna and I discussed the incident that prompted Lesley to vent her prejudice on Shauna's daughter. Shauna told me that her daughter, Lara, was no longer allowed to babysit for the Melendy's two boys. She also looked up at me, in all her five foot, three inch glory and promised she would kick my butt if I left again and didn't keep in touch.

When I was leaving Shauna's house, her doorbell rang. As I was on my way out, I told her I would answer it. And there was Tickle Me Vicky with her clipboard and leaflets. She blinked at me and asked if I was the lady of the house. I told her I was not and hollered in and asked Shauna if she were going to vote for Dane.

"That lying little son-of-a-bitch? If he was the only candidate running, I wouldn't vote!" was her response.

Vicky's eyebrows shot up. I smiled at her. "Guess you got your answer."

"But..."

"That woman in there? Well, she's his older cousin and she's known him his whole life and if she finds him too dishonest to vote for, that's good enough for me."

"That's no reason not to vote for him. All politicians are dishonest..."

"Listen, she wouldn't believe anything Dane Roberge said, *including* if he said he was lying." It took her a moment to think of a response to that and during her hesitation, I reminded her to have a good day and I shut the door. I decided to wait until she left before I bid my goodbyes again to Shauna and drove on to my next visit.

I stopped at Jeremy's first. He was at home, putting the finishing touches on a deck he had been working on the last couple of weeks. He had changed over the past seven years in that he stopped looking so much like his mother and started resembling his father, which meant he physically favored me more than my own two brothers did. I felt an instant warmth from Jeremy that I never felt from Dane and it made me suddenly wonder when and why things had gone so wrong between my little brother and me. I was introduced to Jeremy's wife when she brought us each a beer and we sat on the soon-to-be-completed deck and caught up.

They were both fascinated with my career as a park ranger and Jeremy's wife invited me back to talk to their nine-year-old daughter sometime as she seemed to be obsessed with the environment and cop shows on TV and that perhaps my job would be a natural path for her. I told them that maybe before I left, we could all spend an afternoon at Evergreen Ridge and I could explain to her exactly what it was that I did for work and see if that interested her. She was, after all, only nine. By ten, she might decide she'd rather be a professional wrestler.

I glanced at my watch, noticing the day was flying by and my cousin, Nicole, came to her back door, advising me she was home, so I hugged Jeremy and his wife, telling them to call me about setting up a date for that walk in the park. Just then, we heard a voice behind me say, "Hi. I knocked and rang the bell out front but you must not have heard me..."

Turning around, I came face to face with Tickle Me Vicky again. She stopped dead when she saw me. I just grinned at her.

"Let me guess...these are your cousins, too."

"As a matter of fact, yes." I looked at Jeremy and his wife. "This is Vicky. She's campaigning for Dane."

"Augh. I think not. Thanks but no thanks. It's bad enough he's in the family," Jeremy grimaced.

Vicky's perky expression fell and she thanked them for their time and turned to walk around the house.

Laughing to myself, I reiterated quick goodbyes and rushed through Nicole's back patio door and got to her front door just as the doorbell rang. "May I?" I asked my cousin, who was clearly wondering what ailed me. When she shrugged and nodded, I opened the door to face...Vicky. "Well, hi there."

"Another cousin?" she asked, her tone more annoyed than defeated this time.

"Uh huh." I stepped aside, allowing her a access to Nicole, who stepped up next to me in the doorway.

Ignoring me, Vicky put on her best smile for Nicole. "Hello. My name is Vicky Stancliff and I'm  
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"Are those leaflets promoting Dane Roberge's campaign?" Nicole interrupted, seeing the contents of Vicky's hand.

"Um...yes..."

"You're wasting your time here, lady," Nicole told her. "If this were 'Survivor,' he would have been the first one voted off the island."

Glaring at me, as though I had caused Dane to be so hated, she thanked Nicole and left.

"Poor thing," I said, as Nicole shut the door. "I wonder if she's met anyone who actually wants to support him."

"My guess would be only the bartenders of the Moose Club."

It was then I gave my youngest cousin a hug and we went back outside and spent another hour with Jeremy and his wife.

Poor Vicky must have thought the fates had it in for her because the timing was perfect that when I was leaving my cousin Courtney's house after a lovely visit, I opened the door to run right into Tickle me Vicky just as she was about to ring the doorbell. She didn't even bother to stay and talk to Courtney, she just growled at me and left.

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An hour later, after Lisa had arrived to pick me up to go to her house for dinner and to spend the night, the doorbell rang. As I was feeding Orion, I asked Lisa to get the door and after a second I heard her shout in to me, "Hey, you want to sign up to support Dane in the election?"

I shot up and what could only be described as an evil grin adorned my face. It couldn't be. I practically sprinted to the door, appearing behind Lisa with a shit eating grin on my face.

"Vicky! Long time, no see!"

The woman dropped her clip board and just stared at me. "Who *are* you?"

"I'm Dane's sister."

"And you don't like him either, do you?"

"Not much."

Tickle Me Vicky just shook her head. "That's it. I quit. I'm going to go work for Bill DeMartino. At least everybody likes him."

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18.

Lisa was going to cook me dinner but I talked her into letting me show her my grilling skills instead and after impressing her with my salmon and other outdoor culinary talents, we sat on her patio long into the night, Oz and Deke at our feet, napping contentedly. We went to bed close to midnight and made passionate love for nearly two hours before we fell asleep. When I closed my eyes, she was securely in my arms, her back tight against my chest and when I awoke the next morning, she was spooning me. Everywhere our bodies touched, my skin was on fire. I still could not believe the overwhelming sensations this woman stirred up in me. I never wanted her to let me go.

The next morning, she dropped me off at home and then went to her office, leaving me with a kiss and a smile. I loved that it was the last memory I had of her to get me through the day until I saw her again. I could not believe how much in love with this woman I felt.

After I made myself another cup of coffee and read the paper, I looked up the name of the realtor my mother stipulated and dialed the office number.

The agent who answered, a very nice gentleman named Todd Jardine, had been expecting my call but when I told him that I would like to set up a meeting with him, he advised me that there was a problem. When I asked him what that might be, he became quite nonplussed and then finally blurted, "The validity of the will is being contested by your brother, Dane, citing 'Undue Influence.' I just received legal notice this morning. There seems to be some question regarding who the true recipient of the house should be. Sorry, Ms. Roberge, but until it gets straightened out, all business dealings must be put on hold."

"I understand," I told him, through clenched teeth. "Thank you, Mr. Jardine, I'll be in touch." I placed the receiver in the cradle. "Why that little son-of-a-bitch." I picked up the phone to call Sam at work.

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Within an hour, both Sam and I were sitting in my mother's attorney's office. Ray Palmisano was a short, sturdy man in his approximate mid-sixties, a full head of more salt than pepper hair and a nose pink and bulbous from too many years of hard drinking. His office was messy, cluttered with law books, files and stray papers and it reflected his appearance. His shirt was only half tucked in and his tie was still knotted but pulled down to accommodate the first two open top buttons of his shirt. My initial impression of him was not a favorable one.

I had called Lisa after I notified Sam that Dane was contesting Mom's will and told her what was going on. After she asked me who the lawyer was, she advised me that he was an experienced probate attorney, had a decent reputation but that he had been practicing here for forty years and he was getting tired and could get lazy if not made to toe the line. She further said that there had

been rumors that he was going to retire for the last five years but life-long, loyal clients, like my mother, convinced him to stay in business.

His secretary brought all three of us coffee and Palmisano laid out the necessary paperwork on his desk in front of him. He then looked up at me.

"So you're the mysterious daughter. I've wondered about you for a long time."

Sam and I exchanged glances and then I looked back at Palmisano. "Wondered what?"

"Just...wondered." He didn't elaborate and he returned his focus to his desk. "Okay, here's the deal. Your brother, Dane, is alleging Undue Influence. And what that means is he feels that somebody influenced your mother by excessive insistence, that she was improperly pressured to leave the house to you, Sarah, and because of that pressure, she was unable to refuse."

"Hunter," I corrected.

"Excuse me?" He looked back up at me.

"It's Hunter. No one's called me Sarah since I was born," I half-smiled at him, hoping that might help break the air of tension in the room. It didn't. When he focused back on the file on his desk, Sam reached over and patted my arm.

"So just exactly what does this mean, Mr. Palmisano?" Sam asked him. "There's really no basis for this, right? You know Hunter had no influence over my mother, they weren't even speaking, and you and I worked on all of this will together with my mother."

"This is just going to be more a nuisance than anything else. Think of it like a ref calling a technical foul in a basketball game and the offending player's coach challenging it because he knows it's a bad call." He sighed and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. "As you have already seen, *Hunter*," he put extra emphasis on my name, "the distribution process is temporarily suspended when a will is contested. I think I can prevent this from getting dirty and hopefully from getting too expensive and I will do my best to keep it out of the courtroom. But if there is anything I need to know that might contribute to the validity of his claim, I need to know right now." His eyes bore down on me, accusingly, and I'd had just about enough of his attitude.

"I had no contact with my mother for sixteen years and as Sam will tell you, I didn't want the damned house to begin with!"

"Hunter," Sam said, gently but firmly, placing his hand on my forearm.

"I would appreciate you not cursing in my office," he told me, in a tone that was reminiscent of a reprimanding father.

"Well, I haven't done anything to cause this and neither has Sam," I said, defensively. "What, does Dane think that Sam unduly influenced our mother to leave me a house I didn't even want?"

That doesn't even make sense."

Palmisano shrugged. "No, it doesn't. Honestly, though, neither does her leaving you the house, especially with you being so estranged for so long."

"But you sat right here when she adamantly insisted that the house and everything in it, including the cat, go to Hunter," Sam reminded Palmisano.

"Indeed I was," he nodded.

"Okay, so all the accusing tones aside, what happens now?" I asked.

"Well, while the claims of invalidity are investigated, the probate process will grind to a halt. Even though we're sure that Dane has no legal ground to stand on this can still take up a great deal of time and money, and can throw the will proceedings off schedule completely." He focused on me. "So if you had any specific date to return to the west coast, you may want to consider postponing it."

"Great," I said, trying to temper my frustration.

"Look, I've dealt with your brother before and I understand he can try your patience..." Palmisano began, in an attempt to be appeasing.

"Try my patience? Mother Teresa would have smacked him by now." I crossed my arms.

"So what's our next move?" Sam inquired.

"We wait," he stated simply.

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"I knew he was being too quiet," I said to Sam, outside Palmisano's office building. "Not seeing or hearing from him in any manner after that night in the house was just too out of character for him."

"He doesn't have a leg to stand on, Hunter," Sam soothed. "He can scream Undue Influence all he wants but that will is ironclad."

"Nothing is ironclad these days. Regardless, you and I know it's not about that. Dane may be a buffoon but he's shifty. He knows that will is solid, he just wants to cause trouble for me. He knows by everything having to be put on hold, that's going to cost me money I don't have and time I can't take away from my job."

"He's always been a sneaky little prick, Hunter, you know that."

"Yeah...but something else is going on. He knows I know about his hushed up DUI arrests and

he knows by publicly coming out, I could turn his political aspirations upside down by making him look like the hypocrite he is and yet he's willing to take the risk that I would run him into the ground with the local press. Why?"

Sam contemplated this. "Maybe knowing you don't have the time or money to fight him, he thinks you'll just give up and give him the house."

"He should know by now I never give up as far as he's concerned. It's got to be something else. He wants the house. Bad. Why?" I looked at Sam. "It's not about me. It's about that house. I'm just a pawn. What's in that house that has him so determined to get it, that he'd be willing to give up his future in politics for?"

"You know..." Sam stopped, thinking back, "he has been pretty pigheaded about the house ever since he found out that Mom left it to you. You may have a point."

"*Why* did she leave it to me, Sam? That just doesn't add up. You knew her better than I did, why would she do that?"

He leaned against the Jeep. "Actually, Hunter, nothing against you but I thought that was strange, too. I was pretty sure she was going to leave the house to Dane because he acted almost indentured to her, especially the last few years. And if, for some reason, it wasn't left to Dane then it would definitely come to me...but then she pulls this one-eighty and is unyielding about leaving it to you. No explanation, just 'I want Hunter to have the house and everything in it, including Orion'."

"I'm sure Orion was just for spite." Ideas were swirling around my head, none of which made any sense.

"You and Orion making peace?"

"So far. She's calmed down or she's making me think she has. But she's been sleeping on the bed with us, down by our feet and we actually have all our toes left. I'm still cautious but..."

"How's that going, anyway?" Sam inquired, with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. "You and Lisa?"

"It's going really well, as though we've always been in a relationship. Honestly, nothing in my life has felt more right."

"And how does that figure into your going back out west?"

"We've got to talk about that. Soon."

"Well, now, thanks to Dane, it looks like you'll have a little more time to do that."

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Sam and I said goodbye and I called Lisa to brief her on what had transpired in Palmisano's office and she and I agreed to meet for lunch. There was a big part of me that just wanted to drive to Dane's and confront him (before I pounded him into the ground) and ask him outright what he was up to. This had more to do than with him just feeling slighted, I could feel it. Was there something about the house I should know about? Was there something *inside* the house Dane didn't want me to know about? Was there something in that house my mother didn't want Dane or Sam to have? What had started out as an annoying inheritance was now turning into an annoying riddle and one in which I was determined to find the answer.

Sam had further told me that something happened about three months ago that changed the dynamics of the relationship between my mother and Dane and it was an occurrence that neither shared with him, or anyone else, it seemed. He said that since then things were 'prickly' when they were around each other, even though they both tried to disguise it. I asked him why he had not brought this up before and he told me that there was no need. Our past conversations concerning our mother or brother were usually short and anything but sweet. And, honestly, he added, he hadn't thought much about it. He was surprised she hadn't become fed up with Dane's obnoxious antics a lot sooner.

I asked him if, to his knowledge, Dane had spent any concentrated time in the house alone since our mother died. He told me he didn't know but he doubted it. Mom succumbed to a massive stroke on Tuesday morning and he and Dane were busy making arrangements and just coping. Between then and the time I arrived on Thursday night, pretty much all of Dane's time could be accounted for. Sam went on to say that that Dane did make a comment after I left the get together at Sam and Trina's the night I arrived that he hadn't expected me back so soon, if at all. Perhaps that explained why he had taken his time getting into the house.

Pulling into a parking space in front of Lisa's office, I was about to shut the Jeep off and go inside to get her when I saw her walk out her door and down the steps toward me. I hadn't realized I had been so keyed up about what could possibly be going on that I might now be right in the middle of until I saw Lisa's smiling face and suddenly my tension visibly melted away. But it didn't last long.

Climbing into the Jeep, she said, "I've taken the afternoon off. After I talked to you, I got thinking about something that I know was also bugging you. So I called Sam and asked him if he had fixed your room up after you left, with all your trophies and memorabilia and stuff displayed and he told me no, he never touched your room. He told me the last time he saw it, which was years ago because your mother always kept the door closed, most of your belongings were packed in boxes and there was nothing on your walls, vanity or bureaus. I think we need to go back to the house and look in your room."

I put the Jeep in gear and sped off. What the fuck was going on?

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19.

I took Lisa to her place first, to change her clothes and look in on the dogs. Then we drove back

to my mother's and we were met at the house by Sam. When we converged on my old room, I suddenly felt like I was in the middle of a Nancy Drew mystery, complete with Bess and George by my side.

As Lisa started pulling clothes and boxes out of the closet, I began rummaging through drawers and Sam started removing pictures, posters, paintings and articles off the walls and from around the room.

"What's with Palmisano?" I asked Sam, as we sorted through our individual tasks. "Why his attitude toward me? I've never even met the guy before."

"He's very fundamentalist Christian," Lisa offered. "I would guess he knows you're gay and is just being civil because of his long-standing alliance with your mother."

"But how would he know I'm a lesbian? I'm pretty sure it's not something my mother confessed to him and I would say his gaydar is probably worse than Liza Minnelli's."

"Well, I certainly didn't tell him," Sam volunteered, leafing through a carton containing magazine memorabilia of Sigourney Weaver from 'Alien' and Aliens.'

"He and Lesley's husband, Wally, go to the same church. I would assume he found out that way. I bet you were a big topic of conversation, especially after we dropped Lesley off on Saturday." Lisa held up my letterman jacket and smiled, before tossing it on the floor.

I nodded. "That makes sense," I agreed, as I rifled through a drawer with rolled up socks. I picked up a handful and pitched them onto the bed. I could always use socks.

"Just what are we looking for?" Sam asked, almost sounding frustrated.

"I don't know. Mom hated me, Sam. Despite what you say. Her leaving me this house does not make sense. Just like leaving this room like this, especially if you didn't turn it into a shrine, doesn't make sense, either. She's trying to tell me something, or make some point. Just exactly when she turned into Miss Marple, I don't know. But as for what we're looking for? I hope I'll know when I see it."

For two hours we turned that room upside down and found nothing out of the ordinary. It went from being an orderly sanctum to looking like a bomb went off in it. The three of us started on our feet in different sections of the room and ended up sitting on the floor facing each other amid piles of clothes, books, pictures and just...stuff. I hadn't realized I had collected so much *junk*. And that my mother had actually kept it.

Glancing out the window, I could tell by the angle the sunlight was hitting the panes of glass that we had entered into later afternoon. It would be dark in another few hours. My brother reached around behind him and rubbed his stiff, lower back just as my adorable companion let loose with a thunderous stomach growl. Blushing, focusing on her crossed ankles, she mumbled, "Must be getting close to supper time."

Running my hand through my hair I looked at Lisa then Sam and gestured the disorder in the room. "Well...it sounded like a good idea."

"Yes, it did," Sam agreed, looking around. "Are you going to pick up this mess or just throw everything in boxes and bags and haul it away?"

I shrugged. "I might look through it again...I saw some things I forgot I had that I might not throw away after all."

Lisa dug through the heap and fished out my letterman jacket. "I call dibs on this." She put it on, pushing the sleeves up onto her forearms. It was about four sizes too big for her and it looked so cute on her that even Sam couldn't stop from grinning.

"Aw, isn't that sweet? Next thing I know, you'll be pinned," he laughed.

"Pinned? They haven't done that since the sixties, have they?" Lisa asked.

"Unless he meant this," I countered, tackling her, straddling her and holding her wrists to the floor with my hands.

"Ooooooh. Lisa likes." She laughed, looking deeply into my eyes.

"Sam likes, too," my brother stated, standing up. "And that would put me into areas my shrink wouldn't be able to help me through for years so, on that note, I'm out of here."

"Sorry for the false alarm, Sam," I told him. I should have walked him to the door but I really didn't want to move.

"Don't worry about it." He glanced at his watch. "I can probably get an hour in at work before quitting time, so let me get back to that. Call me if you actually do find something." Then he smirked at us and said, "It's okay, I can show myself out."

"Good. Make sure the door's locked behind you," I called after him as he descended the stairs. I looked at Lisa, hungrily, once I heard the door close. "I don't want any surprise interruptions," I purred before lowering my face to hers.

"Finally," Lisa said, in mock exasperation, "I get to have sex with you in your bedroom. Another fantasy fulfilled."

"Yeah? Well, a fantasy of mine right now would be to have you in nothing but my jacket."

She sighed in restrained excitement, her breath ragged, her eyes sparkling up at me in anticipation. "Then make it so," she whispered.

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It had been interesting making love to Lisa in my old bed and having her attired in nothing but my vintage maroon and silver high school jacket, while I kept all my clothes on. But what made the experience better was exorcising the memory of the only other woman who had ever been in that bed with me.

Cuddling after a very satisfying coupling, while Lisa dozed in my arms, my mind was running on overtime. In between thinking I was turning into a sex addict, I could not kick the feeling that my mother was trying to tell me something. Why do the transformation of my bedroom if there was nothing to find? Had Sam been wrong and had Dane been in the house without his knowledge? It was possible. But, then, if Dane already found what may have been hidden in this room, why would he still go ahead with contesting the will, unless it was just to be a bastard? If there was even anything to find in this room. This was just so confusing.

Lisa stirred and then switched her position, nestling up against my side. We had been keeping some pretty late hours with our marathon sexcapades, so it was understandable that she was tired. Even though I was preoccupied with the house issue, soon I was napping right along with her.

I had slowly, softly, absentmindedly rubbed my hand up and down Lisa's backbone, under the jacket, and lulled myself into a light sleep, when I was startled awake by Orion's pacing around on the bed. She appeared agitated and was meowing to the point of almost a howl.

"Shhh, you'll wake Lisa," I quietly admonished the cat, who jumped around the foot of the bed before walking over Lisa and standing on my chest. Orion then turned in circles, continuing to meow. "What is it, Lassie?" I joked, keeping my voice low, "did Timmy fall down the well?"

It was then I smelled the smoke. Paralyzed, I stopped all movement and took a few measured breaths to make sure I had not imagined it. Nope. It was getting thicker and starting to burn the back of my throat. I grabbed Orion and shook Lisa, frantically.

"Lisa! Come on, baby, we've got to get out of the house, let's go!" I raced out of bed and pulled her to her feet. Groggy and dazed, she woke up quickly when I blurted that I thought the house was on fire. "Put these on," I threw a pair of sweat pants at her and while she slid those on, I grabbed a t-shirt and handed that to her as I yanked her by the wrist out into the hallway.

There was smoke beginning to roll up ominously around the ceiling in the upstairs but not excessively so. Something was burning but I wasn't so sure it was in the house. We raced downstairs, Lisa pulling the t-shirt on and we ran out the front door. My adrenaline was surging through my system so completely, I didn't realize until much later that Orion was digging her claws into me, drawing blood. She was no doubt as frightened as the rest of us and because she probably saved our lives, I could forgive her anything. All the past evils that cat had done to me were now absolved.

Once on the front lawn, with my throat and nasal passage stinging with ash and my heart pumping nearly through my chest, I spotted the source of the smoke. The garage was on fire and

flames were starting to lick the side of the house. "Lisa," I removed embedded nails from my skin and handed Orion to her, "hold her in your jacket." I ran to the Jeep, got in, put it in neutral and rolled it down the driveway into the street, parking it. Lisa had snatched her cell phone on the way out and was calling 911 while I was able to get to the hose without getting burnt. Hauling it out as far as its length would let me, I began spraying the side of the house with water to hopefully saturate it to discourage the flames from jumping completely. However, if the fire department did not get there soon, it was going to be a wasted effort as the garage was becoming fully involved.

It was then I remembered that Mom's car was still in there and, although it was disabled, it probably still had gas in it and there were, no doubt, other accelerants in the garage. This was not good.

Lisa ran up to me, Orion still safely ensconced inside her jacket. "The fire department is already on its way, one of the neighbors called."

We were both coughing, as the wind was blowing the smoke right at us. "Lisa, I need you to get back. I don't know what's in the garage that might be combustible and -"

"Then you get back, too!" She shouted.

"I will when the fire department gets here. I have to keep water on the side of the house."

"No! Saving this house isn't worth your life!" Her tone was determined and pleading and, with her free hand she was tugging on my arm.

She was right. If there was a secret in that house, it would die in the fire. I stopped squeezing the handle and dropped the hose, moving back with her to the street where neighbors and onlookers had started to gather. Only moments later, three trucks from the fire department and one paramedic unit sped in and set up, hooking into the hydrant near the driveway next door and went to work immediately. The roar of the hoses coming to life and the rush of the water hitting the side of the garage like a monsoon nearly overpowered the crackling and hissing of the flames.

"What happened?" The question came from whom I assumed to be the captain. He stood in front of me as the paramedics attended to both Lisa and me. One EMT was treating a cherry-colored mark on my palm that had already begun to blister, where I had held the hot nozzle. I really had not noticed the pain until he began dressing the wound, which suddenly felt like my hand was holding a hot coal impaled there by a dagger. It was definitely a second degree burn.

I watched as the powerful stream from the fire hoses made quick work controlling the flames of the engulfed garage. "I don't know. We were in my room and the cat came in acting crazy and then I smelled smoke. We got out and that's when we saw the garage on fire."

"When was the last time you were in the garage?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Listen, there's a car in there and it may have gas in it and there may be some other flammable -"

"Thanks, I'll tell my guys." As he rapidly walked away to inform his men, I was approached by a uniformed police officer.

"Excuse me, Miss -?"

"Roberge."

"I'm going to need to get some information from you. Are you okay to talk to me now?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." And I was, even though my throat, nose and eyes still burned. I answered his general questions which included giving him all my vital information, whether or not I owned, rented or was just visiting the house and what I was doing at the time the fire broke out. After I gave him all the details he was looking for, I asked, "Any indication this fire was set?"

The policeman seemed surprised. "Are you suggesting this may have been arson?"

"What I'm saying is that I don't think this fire set itself."

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20.

The garage and everything in it was a total loss. Fortunately only the side of the house was lightly charred and the interior smoke damage was minor. Because of that, I made the decision to stay there as opposed to temporarily moving in with Lisa. I was convinced now more than ever there was something in the house that Dane did not want me to find and my mother did.

With my hand loosely bandaged with gauze and even though I still had stinging in my lungs and the back of my throat continued to burn a little, I refused further medical attention, as did Lisa. Once the fire was out, the questions were asked and re-asked and the investigation to determine the cause was underway, Lisa and I went back inside. I was just about to call Sam when he and Trina came racing through the front door, alarmed and upset.

"Jesus, Hunter, what happened?!" Sam asked, both he and his wife approaching us in the kitchen.

I took four bottles of beer out of the refrigerator, passed three around and then kept one for myself. "Did you see the garage?" I asked, taking a long drink, wincing as the carbonation scratched my already irritated throat all the way down into my stomach.

"Yes," Trina responded. "What's left of it." She spied my wrapped hand. "Did you get burned?"

"Just from grabbing the hose nozzle. The fire made it pretty hot," I told her. Quietly drinking her beer, Lisa leaned against me and my free arm automatically went around her shoulder and pulled

her close. She turned her body into my side and held on. She had let Orion go as soon as we got back inside but she was still wearing my jacket. She looked as unnerved as my brother and sister-in-law. I just felt numb and almost detached as I explained waking up to the smell of smoke and what happened right up until they got to the house.

As we were talking, Lisa's cell phone rang and she excused herself, moving away from me and stepping into the hallway. "Yes, Mom, I'm fine," I heard her say. "No, no one was seriously hurt. Hunter's hand got burned while trying to put the fire out but..." She disappeared into the other room.

"She seems distressed," Sam commented, watching Lisa with concern.

"What do you expect? Had it not been for the damned cat, we both could have very easily been crispy critters." That thought made me drain the contents of my bottle in three long swallows.

"What are you thinking, Hunter?" Sam asked, cautiously. "Dane?"

"You know, Sam, I don't want to, I really don't. I don't want to think that, regardless of how my brother feels about me, that he would be so soulless and cold-blooded that he could murder two people by burning them alive in a fire. I don't want to believe I'm related to that kind of a monster. But to me, the question isn't *if* he did it but *why*?"

"No, you don't think that Dane set that fire...do you?" Trina's tone was incredulous. She looked back and forth at Sam and me. When neither of us answered her right away, she said, "I know he can be the biggest asshole on the eastern seaboard but do you really think he's capable of this?"

Lisa walked back into the room and before anyone else could speak, the fire captain knocked on the kitchen door. He was still wearing his insulated structural turnout pants, his navy blue logoed t-shirt under his suspenders with his hood pulled off his head and slouched around his neck. His red helmet, denoting his captain status was tucked under his left arm. His bronzed face was weathered and dusted with black and white ash and his full head of black hair was plastered to his head with sweat. I opened the door for him and he took a step inside. I tried to place him as someone I may have known from my childhood but there was no sense of familiarity there. His eyes alerted on my sister-in-law in recognition. "Hey, Trina."

"Hi Chuck," she acknowledged. She gestured loosely to everyone else in the room. "You remember my husband, Sam. This is his sister, Hunter, and -"

"Lisa Riordan," he finished for her. "I've testified for her a couple times." He reached over and shook Lisa's hand. "How are you?"

"I've had better days. Obviously," Lisa responded, still shaky.

He looked back at me. "And this is your house?"

"It is now. I just inherited it."

Captain Chuck nodded, walking over to the counter and leaning. He moved like a man with an abundance of confidence and inner strength and despite his weary, haggard appearance, a man who took a lot of pride in himself and his job. The look on his face was grim. "I've already put in a call to the county fire marshal. From what I can see - and this is just preliminary - the burn patterns are consistent with arson."

"So you think the fire was intentionally set," I paraphrased, looking pointedly at Trina. I closed my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose, hoping to thwart the massive headache of migraine proportion I knew was inevitable as I tried to organize my thoughts before speaking. I glanced back at our guest. "I have a suspect for you."

"Hunter..." The hesitant, cautious voice belonged to Trina who was obviously not pleased that I was throwing any accusations around at this point. "Think about this, Hunter."

"Why?" I snapped. "Because he's family?" I certainly felt no blood loyalty to someone who just tried to kill me.

"No," she barked back, defensively. "Because if you're wrong, we all, including you, will suffer the consequences of the publicity of it. If you're right, they'll crucify Dane and maybe he deserves that if he just tried to set the house on fire with you and Lisa in it. But if you are wrong, our entire family will be picked apart on the channel five news and in the papers. I mean, this is the kind of story CNN would zero in on."

"She's got a point, Hunter," Sam agreed. "If he didn't do it, everyone is going to want to know why he was accused of it by his own sister. In this town, that would be a big enough story on its own but since he's running for congress, it would be *the* story. It would probably cost him the election and cost the rest of us any privacy we ever hoped to have for the rest of our lives if we stayed in Otter Falls." He looked at Lisa. "That would include you."

Although it was a mildly compelling argument, it still didn't persuade me not to follow my hunch. The events were too coincidental for my brother not to be responsible for this. Before I could speak up and say it myself, Captain Chuck jumped in and verbally echoed my thoughts.

"If he's innocent, we can prove it. If he's not, we need to get to him while we can still preserve any evidence he may still have on him or confiscate any clothes and shoes he may have been wearing before he has the chance to destroy anything." He looked at Trina. "I'm assuming you're all talking about Alderman Roberge?"

Nodding reluctantly, Trina folded her arms and said, "Yes."

"Don't worry, I'll call Jimmy and ask him to pick up your brother-in-law for questioning and ask him to be discreet, as this just may be a family feud."

"Family feud?" I bristled. "This is not -!" I felt a firm hand curl around my forearm and Lisa slightly but deliberately leaned into me. Her gesture worked and I immediately bit my tongue.

"Who's Jimmy?"

"Lieutenant James Macri," Lisa supplied. "He's in charge of the OFPD detective bureau. Dane and Lt. Macri are professional colleagues. Dane leaving work to meet with Lt. Macri on some issue would not raise anyone's suspicions or curiosity."

"Are they friends? I can't see anything but a cover up if they're friends," I told them, getting riled up again.

Captain Chuck smiled patiently at me as he took out his cell phone. "Ms. Roberge, off the record, I'm not a big fan of your brother's. He has caused my department some major problems just because he seems to like stirring the pot. He has been even less accommodating to the OFPD. Unfortunately, for some reason, the mayor thinks your brother walks on water and indulges every whim of his." He pushed a button on his phone, held it to his ear and smirked. "Believe me when I tell you that, although Jimmy will be publicly prudent, the last thing he'll do is go easy on your brother." Turning away, he spoke into the phone. "Hi Patty, it's Chuck Sawtelle. Is Jimmy in? Yeah, I'll hold, thanks." He walked to the door, turned the handle and as he stepped outside, I heard him say, "Jimator! Do me a favor..."

Once he closed the door, there was an uncomfortable silence in the room. Sam was the first one to speak.

"Anyone want another beer?"

"I'd love one," Lisa responded, gratefully.

Sam collected our empties and placed them on the counter and pulled four bottles out of the refrigerator, twisting the caps off, handing each of us one. Trina and I were trying not to glare at each other. I did realize what she was saying and it wasn't for Dane or against me, she was just trying to give me time not to react so emotionally and consider the impact of pointing a finger at my brother. However, she wasn't the one who was nearly incinerated by the bastard, either.

"Hunter," Trina began, breaking the silence, her voice coolly even, "I am not trying to minimize what happened here but I think you forget how small this town is and you don't have to stay here."

"And that is supposed to make me keep my mouth shut about my little brother trying to kill me?"

"That's just it, you're jumping to conclusions because you hate him."

"I don't hate him, Trina. But I sure as hell don't like him. Put yourself in my shoes. I agree with your friend," I nodded my head toward the door, "if Dane didn't do this, he should have no problem proving it. But I am done playing nice."

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Once the air ceased being so thick with tension which coincided with the smell of smoke finally dissipating to barely noticeable, Trina and I called a truce. Even though we were thinking in different directions, she and I ultimately respected each other enough to agree to disagree. I really don't think she thought Dane was incapable of such an act, it was more that she didn't want to believe he would actually follow through with it. And, although Lisa never vocalized it, I had an inkling she felt the same way.

Maybe it should have shocked me more but it didn't and it was obvious that it did not seem to surprise Sam either. I wanted to be a fly on the wall when 'The Jiminator' picked Dane up and started questioning him about the fire and I made that comment to my older brother after Trina and Lisa walked outside to take another look at the garage.

"I'm sure he'll deny everything," Sam replied. "And even if they pin him down to admitting it, it won't be his fault. Nothing is ever Dane's fault." He puffed his cheeks out in contemplation and blew out air slowly. "Hunter...what if Dane didn't do it?"

"Do you really think there's a chance of that?" I reached under the microwave stand and picked up the phone book, placing it on the counter. My tone told him that it was not even in my realm of possibility that Dane could be innocent.

"There's always a chance of it, regardless of how small and it's my job to be the devil's advocate."

That was true. Sam would always argue against me, taking an opposing side to whatever was firing me up, whether he believed in what he was debating with me about or not. It had always been infuriating. I found a grin for him. "Well, if it's not him, then it is awfully coincidental. This house has been here how many years and some unknown party decides to set it on fire now? Come on, Sam, I haven't been in town long enough to piss anyone off that bad yet. Except maybe Lisa's sister." The visual in my mind of Lesley, probably three sheets to the wind, trying to set the garage on fire, made me smile wider. If she was as drunk as she was the last time I had seen her, she would have been lucky not to breathe on the match and combust before it ever got to the garage.

"What's got you smiling?" Lisa's fond, inquisitive voice asked.

I glanced over to see that she and Trina had returned from outside. Lisa stood on the other side of me as I leafed through the yellow pages. "Other than you? Just Sam being Sam." I looked at Trina's unusually pale complexion. "You okay?"

"Yes, it's just...God, if that cat had not woke you up..."

"I'd rather not think about that." And I really didn't. Putting that particular thought out of my mind was the only thing keeping me sane at the moment. "How about we order in and hang out here for a bit until we hear from Lt. Macri? Anyone up for Chinese?"

"Only if we order from The Panda," Sam said. "Last time we got food from that other place, I

regretted it for three days."

"That's because you wouldn't believe me when I told you they spiced their General Tao chicken with a chi-chien pepper," Trina playfully poked him. She looked back at me. "Flames shot out of his ass for nearly a week."

I laughed. "I thought it was my *other* brother who was the flaming asshole."

Lisa walked by me and lovingly squeezed my forearm. "I'm going to go wash up. I'm also voting for The Panda but whatever you all decide on, I'd like some hot and sour soup, two shrimp eggrolls, sesame chicken, brown rice, and a dozen crab rangoon."

"Got it," I said, finding the phone number I was searching for. Then I looked up at my brother and sister-in-law, both wide-eyed, who watched Lisa leave the room.

"She sure eats a lot for someone so tiny..." Trina finally stated.

"Yeah," I smirked, "She stores it up now so that she has energy to burn later." Getting what I meant at the same time, Sam and Trina quickly glanced at each other, then at the floor and then at me, sheepishly. "Orders, please?"

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21.

We had just started to eat our individual take-out orders when the front door splintered open and there was Dane, looking clearly unbalanced, holding an unmistakably loaded .38 Ruger. Nobody moved while Dane's body pulsed with adrenalin, his face beaded in sweat, his eyes crazed. He took in the scene, scrutinizing us all separately, although I seriously doubt he really saw anyone but me. I could hear everyone swallow hard.

I put my hands up, palms facing outward, level with my shoulders and slowly started to rise. "Dane..." I began, my voice firm but calmly pleading, "put the gun down. You don't want to do anything more you'll regret..."

"More?" He sounded like he was on the verge of either laughing or crying. "I haven't done anything! I didn't set that fire! I wasn't anywhere near here! I went to a business breakfast at the Holiday Inn this morning from seven to nine-thirty with two campaign contributors and at least a dozen witnesses, then I went right to work and I was in a committee meeting with six other people from noon right up until Macri pulled me out of it!" He was waving the gun around wildly.

That stopped me dead. If Dane wasn't anywhere near the house all day, who did set the fire? I studied my younger brother who, despite all his former nasty bravado, appeared very vulnerable at the moment. Had I just made a terrible mistake that might cost me or someone else in this room her or his life? "Okay, Dane," my voice was as calm and as soothing as I could muster, "let

Lisa, Trina and Sam go. It's me you want, me you're pissed at, let them go and you and I can talk about this..."

This time he did laugh as he focused on me. "You? I don't want you, Hunter. The house I wanted but not you. No, I'm not here for you." He zeroed in on Sam. "I'm here for *you*."

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In unison, everyone's head, including mine, swiveled toward Sam, who looked stunned. I turned back to Dane. "*Sam?* What did Sam do?"

He never took his eyes off our older brother. "What did Sam do?" He repeated, sarcastically. "That's right...Sam would never do anything. Sam's perfect. Sam's the golden boy. Right, Hunter? Isn't that what we always used to call him?"

I was more than confused. Why was Dane talking to me as though he and I were old buds and why was he going after Sam?

"Sam...what's he talking about?" Trina was obviously just as perplexed as the rest of us.

Before Sam could answer, Dane jumped in. "Yeah, Sam, what's he talking about? Tell them, Sam."

Sam shrugged, apparently as puzzled as we were. "I don't know what you mean, Dane."

"*Tell them, Sam, or I will!*" The aggression in Dane's voice sent a shiver down my spine. But Sam's tone, when he responded, downright chilled me to the bone. It was a controlled snarl, guttural, and if I hadn't been looking right at him and saw his lips move I never would have believed it was him speaking. The shock on the faces of Lisa and Trina reflected the same disbelief.

"Shut the fuck up, Dane. Stick to the plan or you'll ruin everything," he hissed through gritted teeth.

His words struck me like a punch to the gut. *Stick to the plan?* My eyes flashed to Lisa, who had also picked up on the phrase. Her brows furrowed and she cocked her head slightly as though she had not heard him correctly. Yet I knew she had when she glanced up at me. Trina just kept blinking, dumbfounded. The three of us had been struck mute, just watching this scene play out before us.

Dane didn't seem fazed by Sam's abrupt sinister metamorphosis. "You're not running the show anymore, Sam. I'm done. It's bad enough I have to live with the things I've done but I am not going to go down for the things that you've done."

Sam remained seated but his posture relaxed, indicating he wasn't afraid of Dane. "Be careful what you say," he warned our younger brother, his voice still ominously altered. "Don't forget

there is a lawyer in the room."

The focus then turned to Lisa, whose eyes were as wide as mine and Trina's. She raised her hands in concession. "This is between you two...whatever this is..."

As I listened to this exchange between my brothers, I found myself not being able to speak. Usually, I was never at a loss for words but it felt like the two men in the room I shared parents and a childhood with were total strangers, nobody I had ever met before. Where I would have normally jumped in and sided with Sam against Dane, I was unable to do anything except remain still.

"Why would you let Macri pull me out of a meeting and question me about something you *know* I didn't do?!" Dane was agitated, speaking to Sam as though the rest of us did not exist. "Why would you let Chuck Sawtelle leave here thinking I set that fire?! Putting suspicion on me for that wasn't in the plan!"

"Shut up *NOW*, Dane!"

"Or what?"

"Or I'll bury you."

"Yeah, you're good at burying things, aren't you, Sam?" Dane began to pace. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of the hand that wasn't holding the gun.

"Think about your career, Dane...look at what you're throwing away -" Sam began.

"What *I'm* throwing away? Too late, you just did that for me!" Dane thundered.

"I didn't sic Macri on you! Hunter did!" Sam's arm extended sideways toward me.

Barely glancing my way, Dane balled up his unarmed hand and through clenched teeth, he said to our older brother, "But you did nothing to stop her, did you?! I'm tired of it, Sam. Macri knows everything now."

"Everything? I doubt that, Dane, or he never would have let you go."

"He let me go to go home to get my affairs in order and then I'm going back to turn myself in. But he and his boys are on their way here to get *you*, Sam."

Sam's demeanor turned menacing again as he slowly rose out of his chair. "What did you tell him, Dane?"

"Sam, what the hell is going on?" Trina demanded to know. Her tone was frightened, yet determined. It echoed my sentiments as well as Lisa's.

"Shut up, Trina," Sam hissed. *"What did you tell him, Dane?"*

I was torn between wanting to know what the hell was going on and what Dane had confessed to Macri that had caused Sam to become so bizarre and threatening. I was guessing it was going to turn out to be the same thing. I looked at Trina, who was stunned into silence by her normally mild-mannered husband's words to her. I then looked at Lisa who was just transfixed on the interaction between my brothers.

"I told him you set the fire, Sam. And then I told him why."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. I stared at Sam. *"You started the fire?"*

Glaring at Dane, Sam said, "You've never believed Dane, Hunter, why would you want to start now?"

"Because your behavior is freaking me out here, Sam. And if Dane has a solid alibi, where were you? Because, you know, he's got a point...the timing is pretty coincidental."

"Hunter, Jesus, it was bad enough thinking Dane would do such a thing, but you know Sam would never -"

"See, that's the problem," Dane jumped in, "he's got you all brainwashed that he's the good guy and I'm the bad guy and I'll be the first to admit that I'm not perfect but I'm not a murderer."

"*What?*" Trina, Lisa and I chorused.

"Dane...!" Sam warned, again, "shut up *now!*"

"No, Dane, don't shut up," I urged. "Stop being so damned cryptic and say what it is you're here for." Sam was obviously hiding something that Dane knew about and whether Sam was guilty of starting the garage fire or not, I wanted to know why he was trying to keep Dane from talking.

My brothers were staring at each other. Finally, Dane turned to me. "Sam set the garage on fire, hoping to make it look like an accident, didn't you, Sam? Hoping the house would catch fire and burn to the ground, didn't you, Sam? Taking our sister and all evidence with it. Isn't that right, Sam?"

I was finding it hard to breathe. I should not have believed him but something about the bearing of both my brothers in the last few minutes convinced me that Dane was actually telling the truth. Before I could respond, Trina was on her feet.

"Shut up, Dane, what's wrong with you? Sam is not capable of that kind of evil! This is ridiculous. Sam would never do such a thing. Put the gun away and we'll try to help you with your problems," Trina told him, unrealistically. If the situation hadn't been so grave, I would have rolled my eyes.

Dane wasn't quite so diplomatic. He did roll his. "My problems? My problems begin and end with your husband." He pointed the gun at Sam for emphasis.

Sam flinched as Trina and I shouted, "No!" Lisa stayed quietly alert on the couch, perched on the edge, gripping the arm rest.

"Jesus, Dane, you're scaring the shit out of everybody here." I tried to reason with him. "If Macri is coming back here to arrest Sam then there's no reason to keep swinging that gun around."

"Sure there is. I don't know what Sam might do. Besides, when Macri gets here, I want to make sure Sammy is going to confess."

"Confess to what?" I asked, a second before Trina.

Sam slowly stood up. "You are such a fucking idiot," he sneered at Dane. "We were almost there. All you had to do was tell Macri you didn't do it, prove you had an alibi and let me do the rest."

"Murder our sister? And one of the town's most prominent citizens? I don't want any part of that."

"You hate her, Dane! And you're not a big fan of Lisa's, either."

"I don't like them but I don't want them dead. You should have just let me contest the will. I would have gotten the house and it would have been done."

"What is in this house?!" I demanded to know.

"Remains," Dane answered. "Heather Cushing's remains."

Lisa gasped and Trina sucked in a shocked breath. I looked at them, bewildered. "What the holy *fuck* is going on here?"

It was then all hell broke loose. The sound of several vehicles pulling up and stopping outside, brakes squealing and voices shouting, were overpowered by Sam screaming into the air. He started to rush Dane and Dane aimed the Ruger directly at him, cocking the hammer back. Before I could react, Sam grabbed me, swung me around in front of him and the gun went off.

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The joked used to be that if you heard the shot, it missed you.

This was not true in my case. As if in slow motion, even though it had only been a split second, a sharp, high-pitched sound resonated in my ears and then I heard before I felt the thump of the impact. The force of the bullet spun me around and knocked me to the ground as though I had been slammed by a Louisville Slugger. It felt like my upper body exploded. The bullet had

entered the right portion of my chest and exited through my back just below my shoulder blade, feeling every bit like a hot ice pick going in and staying in. Then it really started to burn.

It seemed like hours before I thought to take a breath as a continuing sensation reminiscent of boiling water being poured into my wound overtook me, numbing my right arm, shoulder and breast. I began getting nauseous and dizzy and just before I passed out, I heard screaming and yelling, voices I recognized and ones I didn't and then the last thing I remembered was Lisa's face. She was crying and her expression was terrified and her lips were moving but I couldn't hear her.

Then everything went black.

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22.

When I awoke, it took a few minutes for the fuzziness to go away. Blinking into consciousness, my eyes slowly took in my surroundings, everything looking white, smelling antiseptic and feeling unfamiliar. When I made the mistake of trying to move, penetrating, pulsating pain shot out of my back to my front, up my shoulder, into my neck and down my right arm. It felt like I had been branded with an andiron and was suddenly being held to the bed by an anchor.

Everything was throbbing on my right side from my waist to the top of my head. As what had happened started to come back to me, I figured the excruciating pain must have been the residual effects from the gunshot wound. A sharp intake of breath and an involuntary groan brought about movement to my left.

"Hey, Baby...you're finally awake." My focus zeroed in on a beautiful face and warm, caring, green eyes.

"Hey..." I got out. My mouth and throat were as dry as cotton. "Where am I?"

She kissed me tenderly on my forehead and gently sat on the side of my bed. "Otter Falls Regional Medical Center. You were shot. You had to have surgery, you -"

The room started to spin wildly and I was suddenly very nauseated and I could feel the bile rising in my throat. I looked around, panicky, for something to throw up in. Before I could stop it, it spewed out all over my precious girlfriend. She jumped up off the bed and if it had not been for the extremely pounding headache that accompanied my vomiting, I would have apologized for her now wearing the contents of my stomach, which shouldn't have been very much but it looked like a lot.

Lisa reacted by pressing the button for the nurse, ignoring the mess I had made on her and concentrated on me. She stepped into the bathroom and returned with a damp towel and started to clean me up.

I always came out of anesthesia hard. I'd had a few minor operations in the past where I had to be knocked out and coming to was never pleasant.

"Oh, dear," the nurse commented, when she assessed the situation after entering the room.

"Sorry," I sighed, my head falling back on the pillow. "I'm really sorry."

"Shhhhhh," Lisa soothed. She went back into the bathroom and came back out with a wet washcloth. Lovingly wiping my face, she pursed her lips and turned to the nurse. "I think she might have broken a stitch or two."

The nurse approached me as I looked down at the bandage covering my wound. It was definitely seeping blood, as the gauze was spotting bright red. Looking at me, smiling, then at Lisa, the nurse said, "I was going to come in and change the dressing anyway. I'll take a look at it." As she left the room to get supplies, Lisa started wiping the puke off her shirt with the washcloth.

"What happened?" I was finally able to ask. "I know Dane shot me but...what happened?"

Studying me, Lisa said, "Let the nurse change your bandage first and get you stitched back up if you need it." She must have recognized the agonizing grimace I was wearing. "And get you something for the pain."

"How long have I been in here?"

"Three days."

While I digested that, the nurse walked back into the room with whatever she was going to need to do whatever it was she was going to do. "Well...let's clean you up and see what we have here..."

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We had been alone for at least ten minutes before Lisa spoke. She looked apprehensive and as though she had started to say something several times but stopped herself. She appeared to be trying to gather her thoughts before she actually talked. "Hunter...both of your brothers are in jail."

"Sam, too?"

"Sam, especially," she replied, bitterly. "He used you as his bullet proof vest. And that's the second time he tried to kill you."

I looked away. Not Sam. But I knew it was true because as she reminded me of what happened, my last conscious moments before getting shot replayed in my head. I was still stunned at what had transpired in that living room and how my life had dramatically changed even before the bullet hit me. Hearing the obscure exchange between Dane and Sam was enough for me to

determine that the Sam I thought I knew was not the person he really was. And the blow of that was as bad as, if not worse than, the impact of actually getting shot. "Lisa, what the hell is going on with my family?" I asked her in a more resigned tone than an angry one. "And who is Heather Cushing?"

She poured me a cup of water and placed it on the tray by my bed. "Heather Cushing went to school with me. She was in my class. In our junior year, she disappeared. Nobody knew what happened to her. At first, everybody thought she had simply just run away even though her parents insisted things were fine between them and there was no reason for her to run away. So then the police started an investigation and search parties were organized which your brothers were involved in, but there was no trace of her. It was as though she had disappeared off the planet. Now we know that one or both of your brothers murdered her."

This was unfathomable to me. "I just...can't believe this." I suddenly felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole.

She took my hand and squeezed it, compassionately. "I know, Sweetheart, it's a lot to absorb right now. Do you want to talk about it later? When you're a little more coherent?"

"No," I shook my head, "I want to know now."

Nodding, she continued. "Sam and Dane are pointing fingers at each other, saying the other one did it."

"But why? Why would either one of them do that?"

"Well...that's the big mystery. Wisely, Sam lawyered up immediately when Macri arrested them and Dane, who meant to shoot Sam and not you, believe it or not, sat there and poured his heart out until his lawyer arrived and told him to shut up. But your house is now a crime scene."

"Because I was shot?"

"And Heather Cushing's bones were found in between two walls in the closet in your old room."

"Oh, Christ. How did they get there?"

"According to what Dane said to Macri, she had been buried in the old woods behind Sparrow Pond. But when that area was bought to build a new recreation center on, Sam dug up the remains before his company could start digging. He hid them in a temporary location until your mother went on a three week cruise with three other members of the church, which Sam talked her into and which he and Dane helped her pay for. Then Sam did a little reconstruction on your closet wall. He figured since your mother never went in there anymore, anyway, it was the perfect hiding place. Also, since it seemed to be a given that the house would go to either him or Dane when she died, it should have been a piece of cake."

"But somehow my mother found out?"

"Apparently. About three months ago, she over heard Dane talking to someone on the phone and she put two and two together about Heather. When she found out it was Sam he was talking to, that was a devastating blow but when she learned Heather's remains were in her house, that's when it all became too much for her, resulting in her fatal stroke. But not before she changed her will."

That she was talking about my family was surreal. I just knew we were going to be immortalized on the Dr. Phil show. "Why didn't she just go to the police?"

Lisa shrugged. "I don't know. I guess she explained it all in a letter that accompanied your copy of the will."

A letter that was sitting in my post office box in California. "So that's what was in the house that had Dane so crazy to get."

"Yes. And Sam thought everything would work out and that Dane was overreacting. Whether you kept it or sold it, he was going to burn it to the ground."

"With me in it?"

"Not at first. Remember that day we were in your room looking for *something*?"

"Yes..."

"Well...Sam found it." She reacted to my eyes widening. "Yeah, I know. Sneaky. It was a copy of the letter that's with your copy of the will. It was taped behind one of the sports awards hanging on your wall. I guess she figured when you went to remove everything, you'd find it. It was written a week before she died. When the letter stated that she instructed Palmisano to include a sealed copy of the letter with your copy of the will, Sam knew that he and Dane would finally be caught and he couldn't have that, so he arranged for you to 'accidentally' die in a fire. And then the secret would still be between him and Dane. Funny, isn't it? Dane is the one who had the conscience in the end?"

My head was spinning again. Who was this horrible person that was inhabiting my precious brother's body? If this Heather Cushing disappeared in Lisa's junior year, Sam, and Dane, had been holding onto this for about twelve years. That would have made Sam twenty-three and married to Trina for a year and Dane eighteen and not married yet. What had been their connection to or involvement with this young girl? "Any guesses as to why my brother's may have killed Heather?"

"Sure, I have a lot of guesses at this point but they are probably the same ones you have." She shrugged. "The frame of mind Dane was in, I really have no doubt that he will confess and cooperate and then everyone will know. As for Sam? At this point, what he will do is anybody's guess."

"God. How is Trina?"

"Understandably she is a mess. I really believe she had no clue about any of this."

"I need to go see her when I get out of here."

"She's not seeing anybody, Hunter. As soon as the police are finished with her, she's leaving to go stay with her mother in St. Johnsbury. She needs time to sort things out. She doesn't blame you for any of this and yet, in a roundabout way, she does. There is a part of her that feels if you hadn't come back, everything would be like it was before."

"How do you know that?"

"She said that when Macri took Sam away. I'm sure it was just a knee-jerk reaction."

"Where's Orion?"

"I've got her. She's fine. She's staying in my spare room so she and the boys don't kill each other. Well...I doubt they would kill her but I'm not so sure she wouldn't make cat food out of them," she smirked.

"Wise choice." I tried to reposition my body but my shoulder protested greatly. Lisa stood up and helped me readjust. "When can I get out of here?"

"The doctor will be in to talk with you later, so that's something you'll have to tell me. By the way, your Aunt Cissy, who is your next of kin since your brothers can't be here, is waiting to see you. She generously and graciously spoke with the staff about allowing me priority access to you. The hospital administrator is a friend of mine, anyway, so that also helped. I don't want to tax your strength so I will go grab a cup of coffee and run some errands while Cissy visits and I'll be back." She softly kissed my dry, cracked lips. "I love you, Hunter."

"I love you, too, Lisa."

She kissed my cheek and left the room. I was dizzy, not from illness, pain or medication but from everything Lisa had just told me. Talk about a dysfunctional family... No wonder my mother had a stroke, discovering that her two perfect sons were murderers and her deviant daughter was her best child after all.

"Oh, Hunter, sweetie," Aunt Cissy wailed the second she passed through the doorway. She was crying and smiling at me, sympathetically, as she approached the bed, carefully leaning in to give me a hug. She sat down in the chair Lisa had just been occupying. "How are you?"

Suddenly I was smirking, "You mean other than nearly being killed twice in one day by both brothers, finding out my family is crazier than bedbugs and that there really *is* a skeleton in my closet? I'm fine."

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Two days later, I was released from the hospital and was back at Lisa's. She had requested that my suitcases and other personal belongings which were not considered to be a part of the crime scene be brought to her house. Lt. Macri had made a few courtesy visits to the hospital but he was very cautious in his inquiry. Dane had advised him that I was not involved in any manner and due to the circumstances of my being away through all of this and then being a victim of my brother's as well, his interviews with me were cursory. He did ask me to come to the station when I was out of the hospital to read and sign some statements.

My arm was nestled in a sling, mainly to keep me from moving it too strenuously. Mobility was limited on my upper right side and the pain was ever present but subsiding. Lisa requested that I spend the day, taking it easy and resting but with the doorbell and phone ringing off the hook from reporters all wanting an exclusive, I couldn't relax. Besides, I had as many questions as the media did and I wanted answers. I arranged with Lieutenant Macri and the regional correctional facility to visit with one or both of my brothers.

Sam wasn't talking to anyone and was on a suicide watch in solitary confinement. Dane agreed to see me against his lawyer's advice. Due to the circumstances, we were allowed to meet alone in the private rooms usually set aside for attorney-client meetings or police interrogations.

The town's medium security prison was a two-story steel and concrete building that, except for the razor wire surrounding the perimeter, looked like it could have been a school or office building. Entering the facility, I passed through one metal detector, registered at the desk and was met at the superintendent's office by the deputy warden and Macri. I was advised that Sam wasn't eating and if he turned away one more meal, they were going to have to forcibly admit him to the hospital. I asked them one more time if they would ask Sam to see me. The deputy warden, a bear of a man whose name plaque on his desk read 'Corben' told me that he would try again but so far Sam had refused any visitors and wouldn't even talk to his own attorney, so he doubted my brother would speak to me. I then said, "Tell him I'm not angry and that I love him."

Both men looked at me as though I were as nuts as the rest of my family. "After what he did to you?" Corben stated, aghast.

"Just tell him, would you please?" I responded, a little annoyed. I can't honestly say whether my irritation was at them or myself. I suppose it did sound insane after Sam tried to burn me to death and then get me shot. However, I felt that, maybe, if he thought I would forgive him, he might want to talk to me.

Corben picked up the portable radio that sat in the charger on his desk. Keying his mic, he said, "William Two to Sam Three."

I knew his William Two designation referred to his second in command Warden status and the Sam designation was the call sign of the Sergeant who was either third in command or in charge of section three or something along that line. It was a pretty universal code, except William usually referred to Watch Commander. "Mr. Corben? Could you deliver the message yourself? I

think that also may make a difference."

He looked at me a second time as though I had lost it completely and in a patronizing tone, he said, "Ms. Roberge, I can't possibly deliver a personal message to a resident. Why, if I agreed to that every time someone asked I wouldn't have time to do my job."

Macri rolled his eyes. "Get over yourself, Pete. We need to try anything at this point to get this guy to talk. The Cushing's need to put closure on this, they need to know why their daughter died."

"Then break the other brother, he's been singing like a bitch in heat since he came in here."

"But not about what actually happened the night Heather Cushing died. Other than he didn't do it, Sam did."

"But...Jim..." He was almost whining, "this will set a bad precedence with the other staff and residents."

I placed my good arm over my sling to make it appear as though I were crossing my arms. I pinned him with a glare, conveying what a big baby *and* fucktard I thought he was. I shot a glance over at Macri who, coincidentally, was giving Corben the same look.

"All right!" He breathed out, exasperated, and then left.

"Was he born an asshole or was it something he perfected along the way?" I asked Macri.

"Warden Vandine is on vacation. I'm afraid the power has gone to Pete's head." He reached over and lightly tapped my shoulder. "How are you doing?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you for asking."

"I just know this has got to be tough on you. Well, on everyone involved, I'm sure." His compassion was sincere.

"Have you heard anything from or about my sister-in-law? I'm worried about her but she's gone into seclusion."

"She's been very cooperative but we have only had communication with her when we have needed to talk to her and that's it. She has not been here to see your brother if that's what you're asking."

"Well, okay, I was wondering about that. Maybe a visit from her would help bring him around, too."

"In my book, he's damned lucky he's getting a visit from you. I don't think I'd be able to do it."

"Honestly? I really don't know why I'm here."

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23.

After a surprised Corben returned to his office with the news that Sam would see me, I secured all my items in a locker, was instructed to walk through another metal detector and locked momentarily in a sallyport with Corben. He escorted me to the high security area where I signed in at another desk, walked through two more electronically secure doors and was set up in a private office with a heavy wooden table and four plastic chairs.

"An officer will be in the room with you just in case."

"No. I don't want anyone else in there. I'm sure I won't be able to get him to talk to me if anyone else is present."

"I can't guarantee your safety if -"

"Your officer can stand right outside the door."

"Ms Roberge -"

"Mr. Corben! If you want to hear what my brother has to say about this then you will let me see him alone. If not, we are all just wasting our time here." I realized he had regulations to enforce but I knew Sam would ask to go right back to his cell if we couldn't have privacy.

"I'm sorry, I just can't allow that," He advised me, gesturing me into the room.

"How about this...leave the door open and have your officer stand right outside." I looked at him, expectantly.

"Ms. Roberge, I would think just the fact that your brother tried to kill you twice, two different ways in one afternoon, would be enough to not want to be alone with him."

"I won't be alone with him. Your guard will be three steps away from us." Before he could respond to that, I heard the clanking of the iron barred gates rolling back and I saw my brother, Sam, shuffling toward me, wearing an orange jumpsuit, his wrists handcuffed to a waistbelt and his ankles also shackled. He was flanked by two correctional officers, who looked more nervous to be approaching Corben than they did escorting a 'dangerous,' alleged murderer, attempted murderer and arsonist. When Sam was led into the room, one of his escorts was about to accompany him when Corben's hand shot out and stopped the guard at the door, instructing the officer to stand outside. I nodded my thanks to the deputy warden and then focused on the hollow eyes that once belonged to my beloved older brother.

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"Hi, Sam," I said, my voice breaking at the sight of him and the idea of what was now our relationship.

Not saying anything, he sat down in one of the filthy, stained, once-white chairs. I sat opposite him. Finally he looked up at me. "Can you ask them to close the door?"

"I already did. This is the best I could do." I sighed and glanced around the room. "It doesn't matter anyway; I think we both know this room is probably wired."

He nodded and focused on his bound hands, which were folded on the table. "You want to know why." It wasn't a question.

"Among other things, yes." I couldn't help it. I wanted to reach over and pull him into a hug, grasp his hands, do *something*, but I knew any kind of contact would be prohibited and more than likely end our meeting.

I didn't want to believe this was the same person who wanted to end my life just a few days earlier. I realized that I hadn't just loved Sam, I had worshiped him and studying him from across the table, it hit me very hard and, without warning, the tears just started running down my face.

Hearing me trying to sniff back the stream trickling from my nose and escaping from my eyes, Sam looked up and his face contorted in despair. "No, Hunter, don't cry," he pleaded, "Please..." As he tried to slide his cuffed hands across the table, the guard stepped into the room.

"Roberge," the officer warned and, with a sharp flick of his wrist, motioned for Sam to move his hands away from mine. When Sam slowly complied, the officer assessed the safety of the situation and stepped back, out the door.

When I drew my attention away from the guard and focused on my brother, he was crying, too, which pushed me to borderline sobbing. "Christ, Sam...what's going on?"

"Hunter, I am so sorry. *So* sorry. I never meant to -"

"Don't you dare say you never meant to hurt me. You tried to kill me, Sam. Twice. That goes a little beyond not wanting to hurt me."

"I was desperate! You became an obstacle. I was out of my head, it wasn't even like you were a real person." The look on my face must have told him that I wasn't comprehending this explanation as a reason. "You have no idea what it was like having to be the 'man of the house' since I was six years old, what it's like having to be perfect all the time...the perfect son, the perfect husband, the perfect father, the perfect brother, the perfect employee... You have no idea what I had to deal with, after you left. You thought Mom was impossible before? She was unbearable after. I didn't know what it was that you did but I knew whatever it was, she treated it as though she had spawned Satan's child. She was so adamant about our family reputation and us maintaining that air of perfection that -"

"Wait, are you blaming your actions on me?" I couldn't help but sound incredulous.

He stared at me, blankly, then said, "No...I'm blaming it on her."

I wiped more tears out of my eyes. "Sam...there comes a time in our lives when we need to stop blaming our childhood for the choices we make as adults. If I used Mom's treatment of me as a child as the basis of my behavior now, I would probably be on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. But I made a decision to not believe her characterization of me as a bad, worthless degenerate and turned my life into something positive, despite her. Or maybe even because of her."

"Well, bully for you," he said, sourly. "You didn't have to stay around here and deal with her, either. Maybe had she not kicked you out and disowned you, you would have turned out a lot differently."

"Maybe. But the fact remains, if we use your theory, if any of the three of us should have turned out to be the criminal, it should have been me. And it didn't. All I am saying, Sam, is that there are consequences to the choices we make and we have to take responsibility for them."

He pushed his chair back, as though he were going to stand up to leave. "Well, if that's how you think then I guess listening to what I have to say won't mean anything, so I might as well go back to my cell."

"No, please don't. I want to hear what you have to say. I want to know, Sam. I have to know. Please." I could not remember the last time I had done this much begging.

He sighed, shaking his unwashed hair away from his face. He had several days growth of beard, displaying a few random whiskers that were actually gray. He scratched the side of his chin on his shoulder, the sound making a slight scraping noise. His haunted eyes were tormented, apparently possessed either by the memory of murdering Heather Cushing (and/or what led up to it), or by what he was now facing that would be his existence for the rest of his life. He finally glanced back up at me but he was silent.

"Honestly, I don't know what it was like for you, growing up. I was too busy having to deal with my own issues with her. I thought it was okay for you, for the most part. She seemed to put you on this pedestal and that's the ideal I was supposed to live up to. I just thought, compared to me, you had it pretty good. And I thought we were good with each other about it. I thought that Dane was our common nemesis, you know?"

He shook his head. "Dane was a little shit but I kept thinking he could be controlled."

"Dane was always *out* of control, Sam. Maybe you could control him but he was smart enough not to go after you. I never had that luxury with him. I had to get back at him when I could, which wasn't that often." I knew Sam was aware of all this and I was getting impatient, although I tried not to let it show.

He sighed, readjusting his position and stretched his legs out. "I soon discovered, I couldn't control him. It seems I was always getting him out of trouble. A majority of stuff you have no idea about. One stupid scrape after another. I'd just clean up one of his messes and there'd be another and each one would escalate into a bigger fucking mess. Mom was always warning us to keep our lives above reproach. And then that suck-ass little brother of ours would play up to her and turn right around and get into some shit again."

"Big shit or little shit?"

"What difference does it make? It smells just as bad either way and Mom didn't want any smell at all. You know how she was when she didn't get her way on something. *Everybody* suffered for it. Forever."

I rested my chin on my folded hands. "Sam...what happened to Heather Cushing?"

He hesitated. "My attorney advised me to shut up about that."

I nodded. I was disappointed and I couldn't disguise it no matter how much I tried. "I understand."

"No, you don't. And you couldn't possibly...because...I don't." His voice was threaded with what certainly sounded to me like remorse. "I'll never understand how everything spiraled so out of control that night as fast as it did."

There was a delicate silence between us. I subconsciously ran my free hand over the area of my wound, an action he didn't miss. "You mean, like the afternoon I was shot?" I asked quietly. "What happened to you, Sam? The person you were that afternoon was not you."

"I don't know," he said, sounding distant, detached. "It's like when my nice, orderly little world gets threatened, something snaps in me and I can't rein it in. I feel like I'm in another person's body. I know that sounds like a convenient excuse but it's not."

"When did that start? Because I never remember you being like that when we were kids." And I didn't. Sam was always the diplomat, the negotiator, the peacemaker. Dane could certainly cause him to lose his temper but not to the extent of what I had witnessed a few days ago.

"The first time I noticed it was that one time, when we were in church and they were passing the collection plate, Dane palmed money instead of putting his dollar in there. Mom saw it and, as usual, instead of disciplining Dane herself, told me to handle it. I remember the last time she had told me to handle something he did and I didn't do it right - or to the point where she felt Dane wouldn't do it again - all I heard for the next week was how I had to set an example for Dane and if I didn't, however he behaved was on me." Wow. I hadn't realized the separate negative impact my mother had on all of us. How foolish and selfish to think she had just singled me out. "So the fact that the little fucker had just done something to make my life a living hell again, just pushed me to a breaking point. I hardly remember thumping him." He drew in a deep breath and then sighed. I wasn't there when that happened but I heard about it from Dane that night at supper. My

youngest brother showed up at the table looking like he had been run over by a truck. He sported some nasty scrapes and bruises that Sam told Mom had happened when he went to talk to Dane and Dane pulled away from him and lost his balance, falling down the hill behind the church into the scrap heap. Mom bought it. Or pretended to and admonished Dane for exaggerating.

"So when Dane whined to Mom that you almost killed him, he wasn't lying?"

"No. And if Jackie Riffey hadn't come out back when she did to look for me, I might have gone through with it. I remember being really angry but like I was watching the whole thing from above my body."

"Wasn't Jackie afraid of you or what you were doing?" Jackie Riffey was the Reverend Riffey's youngest daughter, the same age as Sam, and had a huge crush on him all through junior high school.

"Hell, no, she wanted to help me. That was the week after he ran to her mother at the youth fellowship meeting and told her that Jackie and I had been making out in back of the pipe organ. But the sound of her voice brought me back to reality. It just got worse from there. I should have got counseling. I should have seen somebody about the anger. I knew it was abnormal. I brought it up to Mom once and she told me that only crazy people see psychiatrists. She said going to a psychiatrist would send out the wrong idea about our family and she wouldn't hear of it. There was nothing wrong with me."

"Jesus. Her whole family was insane! Talk about denial..." My grandparents died before I was born so I never got to know them but I'd heard plenty of whispering about them from the men who had been married to my mother's sisters. According to my mother, her parents were eccentric saints but in the opinions of my uncles, my grandparents were fucking nuts, which was why we probably weren't allowed to see or associate with my mother's brothers-in-law after her sisters died. My mother had three sisters, two of whom committed suicide (one by overdosing on sleeping pills and the other by carbon monoxide poisoning, having locked herself in her garage, in her car with the motor running, something, she said in her suicide note, the little people who lived in her light fixtures told her to do) and one who passed away after a short, undisclosed illness. We were always told it was cancer that claimed her but I never quite bought it. Since they all lived a substantial distance from Otter Falls, what was spread about them was pure conjecture, since the only person really able to deny or confirm any rumors or gossip about them was my mother. And now the third generation was suffering as well. "Didn't you think about getting counseling on your own, when you became an adult?"

He shook his head, sadly. "By that time, I had adapted her philosophy. I believed if everything was okay in my head, it would be."

"Was Heather Cushing a casualty of believing everything would be okay in your head?" I asked gently.

"God. She didn't deserve what we did to her." His voice was anguished.

"What happened?"

He lifted his hands to push his hair back on his head and his handcuffs clanked and jangled. It suddenly and harshly reminded us both of our surroundings. Placing his hands back on his lap, he said, "It was Dane again. He fucked up. One more in a succession of many. He had been trying for months to get Heather to go out with him. She was always busy or dating someone else. She had just broken up with some guy from the community college, so Dane asked her to the senior prom. She said yes because, it was only a week away and, I guess, being with Dane was better than not going. Once she got him there, she dumped him and ignored him."

I grimaced. "Dane or not, that wasn't a nice thing to do."

"I agree. But he just should have left it alone. Three nights later, he came over to the house and talked me into going with him to Heather's so he could talk to her. He said he needed to tell her off and he needed me there for moral support. I remember telling him to be a man and go alone. But he was very upset, so I said okay."

"Where was Trina?"

"She and Eric had gone to her mother's in St. Johnsbury for the week. Her mom was recovering from some kind of surgery or something and she went up there to help out." He sniffed and shook his head, blinking his thoughts and recollection back into focus. "Anyway, we got to Heather's and she told him he couldn't come in because her parents weren't home. He asked if he could talk to her about prom night and she told him there was nothing to talk about, that she never promised him anything other than she would go to prom with him. She said that's exactly what she did, then told him he was lucky he got that far with her. Then she saw me waiting in his car and that's when the trouble started." Sam paused and then looked out at the officer standing just outside the door. "Do you think we might be able to get some water in here or something?" he raised his voice just loud enough for the guard to hear. I watched as the officer glanced at Corben, who nodded, and the guard said something into his radio and within a minute, two big bottles of water were brought in and left for us. I opened one for Sam who took a very long drink. "Where was I?"

"She saw you waiting in Dane's car."

"Right, right. Okay, so, she pushed by Sam and walked up to the car and leaned in the passenger side and started flirting with me. Me! Right in front of Dane. Now, I don't like the little puke but this just wasn't right. And I could see Dane was just devastated. I was polite to her but she was pissing me off because she kept trying to get closer to me and touch me and I finally told her to knock it off and apologize to my brother. She got this really funny look on her face and then said that she'd only apologize to Dane if I took her for a ride in the car and then she winked at me. I told her I was a married man and I wasn't going anywhere with her then I told Dane he was an idiot to have the hots for such a slut. All she did was smile. I told him that we needed to go, that he was wasting his time. So then she turned to Dane and told him that she'd give him a blow job if he just took us all for a ride. He looked at me like a whipped puppy and I said absolutely not. Told him I didn't want any part of it. Then she said if we didn't take us all for a ride, she would

start yelling rape and I'm thinking, 'what kind of wingnut is this?' so I told Dane she was bluffing and we needed to leave and, damn, if she didn't start screaming. Dane tackled her and put his hand over her mouth to shut her up. If anyone heard her, they never said anything about it." He took another drink from the bottle.

Was *everybody* in this town - with minor exceptions - certifiably loopy??? I was beginning to thank the entity I really didn't believe in that my mother kicked me out and I had the presence of mind to leave, as opposed to stay here and fight her, trying to prove something to her. The more I thought about it, the more I was aghast yet grateful that Lisa had turned out so well-adjusted - unless she was hiding an alternate personality from me, too. Jesus, I couldn't fathom that, so I returned my attention to Sam.

"When he took his hand away from her mouth, she told him that unless we took her for a drive, she'd start screaming again. I was out of the car by this time and I told him to let her scream and let's go. But she picked that time to reach down and start rubbing Dane's crotch and gave him this kiss that almost got me hard just watching them. I walked over and started to yank him off her and he stopped me and just started dry-humping her right there. I told him, that was it, I was walking home. I heard her say that she would only let him continue in the car and only if I drove them around."

"And you went along with it?" I was pretty sure where I saw this scenario going but I asked anyway.

"I refused at first but horny little Dane begged me. He wanted her bad and it was obvious that he was ready. I don't know why I went along with it, Hunter. I guess I didn't want her to give either of us any more trouble. If driving them around until they got off would do it, then I was all for it. I just figured that she was a spoiled brat and that they were horny kids and I thought I had made myself clear about not being interested in what she was offering me. I know I should have left or insisted Dane leave but I remembered what it was like to be that horny and that hot after someone and having the opportunity to go for it."

"Trina wasn't your first?"

He glared at me. "You're kidding, right?"

No, I hadn't been. I truly thought that he was a virgin when he met and fell head over heels in love with Trina. He always struck me as being too shy to be any kind of 'ladies' man.' However, I realized that I had been mistaken about so many other things, it only made sense I would be wrong about this one, too.

"Jackie Riffey was my first, if you must know," he confessed. I looked up at the ceiling, wondering where the microphones were planted. Now the whole town would know. "I was sixteen."

"Sixteen? You lost your virginity with the minister's daughter when I still lived at home and you never told me?"

"Well, you lost your virginity with the minister's wife when I still lived at home and you never told me," he countered.

Point taken. I could imagine the 'ears' in the main control room were having a field day with this. I glanced out the door at the wide-eyed deputy warden and then looked back at my brother, who had a raised eyebrow and a familiar smirk. At that moment, he was once again the brother I knew and adored. It made me want to burst into tears again. "I think we should move away from that subject and get back to the other," I suggested.

"Yeah. That. So I gave in and agreed to drive them around while they did their thing in the back seat. Do me a favor...if you do get to talk to that little bastard, call him 'minuteman' and watch him go ballistic."

"Too much information," I told him, smiling. Poor Dane...he was obviously a failure at, well, pretty much everything. "Let me guess - that wasn't enough for her."

"Don't think it was enough for him, either, but she was finished with him. She said she wanted a man, not a boy, and one who knew how to satisfy a woman. She climbed over to the front seat and started kissing on me. I told her to knock it off but she didn't, she grabbed me and started stroking me."

This girl sounded like she was as much a piece of work, in her own way, as my brothers were. "What was Dane doing?"

"Recovering." Sam looked at the ceiling, randomly studying the supposedly soundproof tiles, taking a few measured breaths before looking back at me, continuing. "I kept trying to push her away from me with one hand, push her back to the passenger side, but she wasn't having any of that. She held onto my johnson like her hand was superglued to it. I had to pull the car over and stop before she caused us to have an accident. Things just went crazy from there."

"Sounds like they were already crazy."

He buried his face in his hands. "In my mind, I've relived this every day but this is the first time I've talked about it since that night." When he dropped his hands back onto the table, his face was red and his eyes were misty. "She thought I was pulling over to fuck her, so she crawled onto my lap...and despite myself I got an erection. She unzipped me and God help me, she almost had me in her when I just...lost it. I love Trina. I didn't want my marriage ruined by some slutty, insatiable teenage girl who meant absolutely nothing to me. So I threw her off me. It took all my strength to do it so when she landed against the door, she hit pretty hard and knocked the wind out of her. It also caused her to split her lip and put a gash in her cheek so when she got her breath back and realized she was bleeding, she came unhinged. She attacked me and was screaming at me that I ruined her face. She said she was going to go to the police and tell them that Dane and I had ganged her. She wouldn't stop pounding on me and screaming that."

"And what was Dane doing all this time?"

"Nothing. He just sat there in the back seat too afraid to do anything." He took another drink. "I ended up having to drag her out of the car. I could try to tell you it was to calm things down but that would be a lie. I was too far gone by that point. I don't really remember exactly what I did to her. The next thing I remembered was Dane violently shaking me and bawling like a baby and yelling frantically, over and over, 'Sam, what did you do?' and I looked down at Heather Cushing's lifeless body. And I knew she was dead." By this time, he was crying and my heart was breaking for him. I didn't condone his actions but I could certainly understand how the incident could have mushroomed into the situation it became.

"Are you sure Dane didn't do it during your lost time?"

"The blood was on my hands, Hunter. Literally and figuratively."

"And obviously you didn't go to the police yourself..."

He shrugged. "And tell them what? That I drove a minor around isolated areas of town so that she could have sex in the back seat with my brother and when the oversexed little lust bucket turned her voracious appetite on me, I killed her? Yeah...that would go over like a loud and smelly old fart in church."

"So what happened next?"

"We put her into the car, drove her to the west side of Sparrow Pond, you know, the marshy, deserted side? And we buried her there. It took us all night to dig a hole deep enough with a crowbar, a window scraper and our hands but we did and no one ever found her. I burned her clothes...maybe I should have burned her body as well. Then when it was announced that a new project, a recreation center, was going to go up in that area and they were going to extend the pond over the marshy area, we knew we had to get the body out of there. I didn't know what to do. That's how she ended up in the house. I thought for sure the house would go to Dane or me whenever Mom passed away. But Mom overheard Dane, drunk, on the phone to me one day and she confronted him. He told her what had happened and where Heather's remains were. She told him he was never to speak of it again. That would have been the ultimate scandal, if anyone ever found out, you know? But I think that's what led up to her stroke. We didn't know until the week before she died that she had left the house to you. I really think she got some satisfaction out of telling Palmisano, with me right there, that she was changing her will."

I nodded. "Why didn't you set the house on fire before I got there?" The thought of broaching this part of the discussion began to make my head pound. I really didn't want to rehash the idea of my brother wanting me to burn alive in an inferno but I had to know, when he had other choices, why he made that one.

"I thought you'd sell the house. And then when you were safely back in California, I would have burned it down. But then when you figured out that Mom was trying to tell you something and that she had set your old room up the way she did, hoping you would figure it out, that concerned me. Then finding her letter and reading what she wrote to you, seeing that she sent a copy to you

in California, I...I wasn't thinking...I was acting purely on instinct. I was protecting my secret any way I could. I...I panicked."

"Sam - what did Mom's letter say?"

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24.

I knew my mother didn't like me. But it really hurt to learn that she had stopped loving me, making me wonder if she ever did. I tried to believe, through the years, that her dislike for me was just a surface thing, that in the depths of her heart, she forgave me for not being the daughter she wanted. Yet instead of the years softening her, she became hardened and contemptible regarding anything to do with me. When I did finally get to see Trina, as she handed me the wrinkled copy of the letter Sam had left at their house and not had a chance to destroy, she told me that my mother despised me and even the mere mention of my name would send my mom into fits of frightening rage. I asked her why she and Sam tried to make me believe the opposite and she said that Sam didn't think I needed to know the extent of our mother's hatred for me. If I had any deep-seated fantasy that there would be a fairy tale ending to the saga of my mother and me, that she would admit that she overreacted and confess her undying love for me, it was vanquished forever by the contents of her letter.

The tone of the missive was cold and blameworthy. She could very easily have written it to a total stranger, except the stranger's version probably would have been more compassionate. It stated that my brothers had apparently committed a murder and that the remains of the young 'whore's' body had been placed between the walls of the closet in my old room. It further stated that she was advising me because if I turned my brothers in and ruined their lives and the family name, it would be on my shoulders and if I didn't, and spared them, it would be on my conscience. So, either way, somebody would suffer but it appeared that in either case, she tried to set it up so that I would be the bad guy. She advised me that we reap what we sow and that my unnatural, unforgivable sins had brought me to this pivotal point of my life and that my evil must have rubbed off on my brothers. She said that my moral sense, if I indeed had any, would be sorely tested by this.

I never understood how parents could choose their religious convictions over their own children, how they could act as though a child they brought into this world and raised and nurtured, suddenly never existed because their son or daughter was predestined to live a life different than their own. I was amazed that this woman who was so firm in her alliance with the Bible, had opted to stand by her sons who, regardless of the circumstances that led up to it, had committed murder and then covered it up over a daughter whose only crime was to love someone of the same sex. How she perceived that as being worse than taking a life would never make sense to me. But, then, somehow I knew that I could have been as 'perfect' a child as one could possibly be, lived an exemplary life and she still would have favored her sons over me. The other question I had was how she could know her sons were harboring this terrible secret, help them keep it, continue to protect them, place the responsibility of what to do on me and still feel sanctified?

How she could still think this made her more righteous or superior? She could forgive her sons for breaking a major commandment but not her daughter whose alleged violation of the word of God was always up for debate. There was no disputing murder. My brothers' transgression ranked number six whereas my so-called sin never even came close to the top ten.

It took me two days to recover from the significance of what, in essence, my mother's dying words were to me. The funny thing was, nothing she said was really much different than the negativity she had instilled in me all along, yet the desire to want to finally hear something more positive from her, the longing to be 'forgiven' and approved of and accepted and acknowledged was further embedded into my heart than even I expected it to be. When Lisa had told me there was a letter to me from my mother, deep down inside, I wanted it to be an apology, an acquiescence of tolerance and an admission of guilt at how wrong she had been to treat me the way she did. I would have settled for a simple, 'I love you.' Those three little words would not have changed anything but they would have meant so much. The letter was her incontrovertible last word that my wish of being morally exonerated was never going to happen and what I was left with, I would have to find a way to deal with. The blow of the reality of that, however, hit me harder than I ever imagined it would.

Lisa continued to be my rock throughout the ordeal and the discovery process that my immediate family was as unbalanced and disturbed as the generation before us and the one before that. It made me wonder if I was as deranged as the rest of the Roberge-Hunter clan and my inevitable emergence of dormant mental illness had not yet been awakened. Lisa assured me I was overthinking the possibilities but therapy would probably be a good idea, regardless. She also acted as my legal advisor until such a time came where I would need actual representation. Her commitment to me was steadfast, even when her parents threatened to disown her if she continued the 'embarrassing, scandalous' allegiance to me. Someone made of weaker stock would have crumpled under the glare of such an unflattering spotlight and from the pressure of her family and more prestigious colleagues to sever her ties with me. Her love for me was unwavering despite the negativity.

She remained sanguine and sensitive and became my personal sentry, not only keeping a tight rein on others around me but she continued to monitor my emotional state, ensuring I would not shrink too deeply into an abyss of self-pity. She unquestioningly understood when I needed to be alone to absorb all that had taken place and the implications of what it all meant. She held me at night and let me cry out of frustration or sadness or silently shake with anger and she never once told me what I should be thinking or saying or doing. She offered her opinion and her advice and her support even if she didn't agree with me. Lisa was there when I needed her and not there when she knew I needed to figure things out for myself. Had fate somehow not brought this wonderful woman back into my life, I had serious doubts that I would have survived this living nightmare.

The local press stalked me everywhere and my response was always the same. Silence. Sometimes it was extremely hard to ignore them as their behavior and questions were quite intrusive, offensive and vicious. Not that I really blamed them. My brothers did a despicable thing and the journalists were paid to get the story but their obstinacy reminded me of a pit bull that had locked its jaws onto something and wouldn't let go. As much as I did not want to be the

focus of their attention, I was caught right in the middle of the media storm, especially since no one from the press was allowed access to either of my brothers. They doggedly asked me questions to which I had no answers, anyway, so I figured my best course of action was to just keep my mouth shut.

I even had one annoyingly persistent reporter follow me into the restroom of the outpatient clinic when I went to have my stitches removed. It was a two-stall bathroom/lounge and as I was relieving my bladder, she attempted to interrogate me from the, shall we say, 'seat' next door. The only thing I remembered saying was, "You've got to be kidding me," while I finished my business, leaving my stall and trapping her in hers by shoving a heavy chair against the door, piling a coffee table and two full trash cans on top of that. I had thought about dumping the contents of one of the garbage containers over the wall of the stall and on her head but I had already run the risk of re-injuring my shoulder just by the lifting I had already done. When I left the restroom, I went to the desk and asked if they had an 'out of order' sign, explaining that both toilets seemed to have a plumbing issue. The very polite but way too busy receptionist hurriedly whipped out her black marker and wrote 'Out of Order, Use Other Bathroom By Entrance' on a white sheet of paper, put tape on it and asked me to post it on the door. Then, as she answered another ringing phone, she handed me a heavy keychain and asked me if I minded locking the ladies' room so that no one would use it out of desperation and make it worse. She shouted after me to make sure it was empty first before I secured it.

Funny...but *somehow* the washroom key found its way off the overcrowded key ring and ended up in my pocket that afternoon when I left the clinic. And, for *some* reason, since then, neither the reporter nor her newspaper bothered me.

I had stopped watching the news or reading the paper by then anyway because I'd already had my fill of the reporters taking little tidbits of truth and distorting it beyond recognition and interviewing neighbors and co-workers of my brothers who knew less than I did about the incident. Speculation quickly became gospel and suddenly anyone with the last name of Roberge got dragged through the mud just by association. And it was honestly too upsetting to watch Heather Cushing's friends and family's relief that my brothers had finally got caught and would now get the punishment they so righteously deserved. I didn't blame them for feeling that way, I was pretty sure I would be the same way if I had to deal with what they did for all those years but that didn't make it any less painful for me to have to listen to them.

I strangely found comfort in Orion, and spent hours just stroking her mink-like fur while she curled up on my lap and passively tolerated my ministrations. The insistence of her being bequeathed to me was still a mystery. My guess was that my mother knew the cat viewed me as a clawing post and an object on which to sharpen her teeth and tossed Orion into my inheritance to add insult to injury. If she could have guessed the cat would save my life (and the life of my lover), I have no doubt she would have made different arrangements for the sly Abyssinian's care after her death. If I had been told a month ago that I would be grateful to own this cat, I would have laughed myself sick. If I had been told a month ago that both my brothers would be in jail awaiting trial for a twelve-year-old homicide they both covered up, that my mother kept that secret from the moment she discovered it and that I would meet my soulmate in the time that I spent here, I would have responded by telling the bearer of this news that they were more insane

than my loony relatives.

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When Dane found out that I had actually seen and spoken with Sam, he refused to see me. I don't know why he chose to throw a tantrum about that. I wanted to hear Dane's side of the story but then, when it came to my younger brother and his regularly narcissistic logic, there usually was no other side of a story. My guess was Dane figured that after speaking with Sam, tradition and experience would have prompted me to not want to believe Dane. He could not have been more wrong. Even if his memory of the incident had been different than Sam's, I really wanted to hear how everything went down from Dane's perspective and how closely his recollection aligned with Sam's. Unfortunately, all I heard from Dane was what his attorney said at the press conferences of which Lisa had been keeping track and that was "The truth will come out at trial."

A trial which never materialized. Dane was asking for immunity to testify against Sam until Sam pled out, confessing to the voluntary manslaughter of Heather Cushing, basically meaning that her actions provoked him to kill her in a heat of passion, causing him to act impulsively and without reflection. The specifics of the plea agreement were never provided to me and all of the details were worked out by Sam's and the Cushings' attorneys. What Lisa could find out for me was that Sam would be sent to serve twenty years at a maximum security facility in Virginia and would be reviewed for possible parole in fifteen years. I found out much later that one part of that deal was that he was never to return to the state of Vermont to live when he was released.

Dane still wanted to hold out for court but his attorney advised him that with Sam making the deal he did, criminal proceedings would be a mistake and finding an impartial jury for a fair trial anywhere near Otter Falls would be damned near impossible. Dane was reminded that helping to commit a felony usually carried the same penalty as the felony itself and that voluntary manslaughter was a first degree offense. The attorney told Dane they better start looking for a deal, too, because if Dane risked a trial, he might be facing life in prison. Finally pleading out, Dane received fifteen years with no possibility of parole for accessory, conspiracy and impeding an investigation. My youngest brother would serve his time on a medium security farm facility near the Vermont-Canadian border. He also agreed to establish a Heather Cushing Memorial Scholarship Fund which would be presented to an Otter Falls High School senior each year, helping out with the first year of college.

Since my mother's home was not the scene of the murder, it didn't hold the stigma it might have under other, more extreme circumstances and the real estate agent (which wasn't my mother's choice, Todd Jardine - he wanted nothing to do with me or the house), surprisingly had a lot of people lined up, wanting to buy the damned place. Either it was morbid curiosity or that the price had been lowered considerably which made it a hot property. I didn't have to worry about profiting from the sale of the house because whatever money that would be made and any inheritance that anyone would have received from my mother's modest estate would now be legally tied up in a wrongful death suit by the family of Heather Cushing. Regardless of Heather's provocative behavior that night, the Cushings did not deserve to lose their daughter and even though her death was accidental, the financial gain from the sale of the house was going to go toward restitution.

Trina put her and Sam's house into the hands of an attorney and moved to St. Johnsbury with her mother. She began immediate divorce proceedings against Sam and only saw me once more before she left town. She asked me not to keep in touch, that anything to do with me would be too heartbreaking for her. I respected her wishes and bid her a good life starting over, once she shed her married name. I could not imagine what she was going through and she chose not to share it with me.

My aunt and my cousins rallied around me. Even though they were stunned at Sam's involvement and, despite Dane's usually out-of-bounds behavior, a little more than mildly shocked at his participation, too. They knew I was an innocent bystander and my Aunt Cissy was like a mother bear protecting her cub whenever anyone spoke ill of me around her. She, her children and her grandchildren risked constant ostracism yet they remained loyal to my integrity, doing their best to maintain my honor. When my fellow Otter Fallsians exhausted their insults about my brothers to no avail, then they would start attacking my sexual orientation. How my aunt didn't end up in jail on an assault charge, I will never know.

I stayed with Lisa at her place throughout the ordeal and we hung around Otter Falls long enough for her to find new legal representation for her clients, close her practice and sell her house. Her parents and her sister did not renounce her as they had initially threatened but things were somewhat thorny, especially when I was around. Lesley refused to speak to me or even look in my direction, which was fine with me. I had lived over half my life without her in it, I think I could manage. I just felt badly for Lisa, although she insisted it wasn't that big of a deal for her, either. She told me that if Lesley was going to behave like a horse's ass then she could certainly be treated like one. Mr. and Mrs. Riordan promised Lisa that they would visit her once she got settled but I wasn't going to hold my breath, considering that Lisa and I were now a package deal.

We hired a moving company to haul across country a combination of whatever personal belongings we agreed to keep, to be delivered to my apartment. It would be a temporary arrangement until we found a house to buy. We purchased a used, forty-five foot Recreation Vehicle, packed up Orion, Oz and Deke and began our journey to California, where we would embark on a new life together. I wasn't exactly sure what would happen once we reached our destination but I knew, if I chose to, I would finally be rid of any ghosts that haunted my past and be free to start a future with and love this extraordinary woman seated next to me who, at my insistence, was highlighting tomorrow's route on the map. She just wanted to close her eyes, place her finger on the map and chart a course from there. She wanted to go wherever the road would take us.

I think that was going to be the metaphor for our new life.

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THE END

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