

~ Lost ~

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This is an adult story that primarily features stories involving women. If it is illegal in the state, province, or country in which you live; or if you are under the age of 18, please close this story and find something else to read.

There are consensual sexual relations between adult women, which may be graphically explicit. There are elements of strong language, violence, physical and/or mental, as well as some emotional hurt and discomfort in the story.

The events portrayed in this story are fictional and any resemblance to actual events and/or people is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgment: . . . Thank you for all your help Alice, Carmen and Karen

Dedication: . . . For my friend Lynn, thank you for the idea and the input.

Life can throw us curves when we least expect them. Just when we think everything is as it should be, an event occurs that rocks our world changing our lives forever. It is then that life altering decisions must be made. We find ourselves drowning in an undertow that has sucked us below threatening to pull us down into its deepest recesses. Surfacing, will we cry out *take me* or will we struggle to stay afloat desperately trying to find safety? And, if we do find safety, will anything ever be the same again?

Carol Barngate was in her fifties wanting nothing more than to live out her life basking in the glow of family and friends. For her, life had been good both personally and professionally. She considered herself happy until an innocuous meeting started her on a journey to self discovery that she never thought possible.

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The sounds of running water wake me from a blissful sleep. Opening my eyes, I stare at the white swirled ceiling of a room in the Hotel Monaco in Washington D.C. My body is naked and I am sure I still feel kisses lingering everywhere as the taste and smell of Jack fills my senses. Never in my wildest imaginations could I believe anything or anyone could move me to such a passionate encounter. Yet, here I am, pulling back the soft white sheet, letting my bare feet touch the richly carpeted floor, walking towards the bathroom and opening the door. I can't help myself. I want, no need, to feel that luscious body next to mine again.

How is this possible? How did I get to this place? Just ten days ago, I thought my life was complete. I was wrong.

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It was just like any other Wednesday, or so I thought. I leaned back in my chair trying to block out the images of abuse Connie Hanson had just shared with me.

Twenty-six years ago, I began working at the Health Department as a social worker and I'm still here. From my earliest recollections, my father told me, *always have a contingency plan and a backup*. I think that philosophy was what helped me survive my profession. Too many of my associates became another statistic of a job with a very high burnout rate. How could one ever survive all the heartache and ugliness in the job without a backup plan? I never took on a case that surprised me and that was my redeeming quality. Now, I am a supervisor of a group of devoted social workers and try to impart my father's philosophy on them.

I am happily married to Mike who works for a large corporation specializing in making light bulbs. That has always been our little joke about the company where he works. We were college sweethearts, married right after graduation, and settled down in a little 'shuttered house with a white picket fence'. A year later our son MJ, Mike junior, was born and I settled into the perfect wife and mother role. Two years later when Kathleen was born we became the perfect all American family. Once both kids were in school, I

began working for the county health department and have been there ever since.

The kids are all grown now and Mike and I are once again getting to know each other. Our son is a computer engineer who travels around the world installing and troubleshooting multimillion dollar computerized machines for hospital operating rooms. He and his wife, Janet and two children live an hour away. Yep, I am a grandmother...imagine that. Our daughter, Kathleen, is a psychologist living in LA with her husband Richard Sabastian.

Life is good. Or, so I thought.

As with most, working Wednesdays for the past twenty-five years, my friend Nancy Delarosa and I are to have lunch together. After the grim pictures and details of the child abuse case and the ensuing meeting with the police, I was ready for a nice relaxing hour away. The phone rings and my heart sinks as I hear Nancy's voice.

"Hey, we need to change the plans..."

"You're not canceling on me are you?" I blurt out not letting her finish her sentence.

Nancy's deep resonating laugh lets me know we were still on. "Like I'd cancel today, it is your turn to pay." Clearing her throat, she continues, "I do have a bit of a problem though."

"A bit of a problem? Right! Nanc, you never have a bit of anything. What's up?" Nancy faces life with gusto at a hundred miles an hour.

"We have visitors from DC and I need to bring one of them along with me."

I smiled. Nancy never did anything because she had to there was a story here I knew it. "So what's the real reason?" I laughed.

"If I don't, this person will have to suffer through lunch with the Mayor and his staff."

"Oh, God not that! By all means bring him along."

"Her," she corrected, "and, I will pay this week."

"Now, Nanc, you know how confused I get with who's week is whose. It will be my pleasure to pay for everyone's lunch. It's not often I get to rescue someone from the clutches of the Mayor. I'll meet the two of you at Vinny's. The usual time?"

"Yep, later then. Bye."

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Walking up the street towards Vinny's, I can see it is already teeming with patrons. Approaching the door, I excuse myself past the crowd of people and enter the restaurant. Once again, I meet another group of waiting diners in a small alcove. I smile when Gio spots me and waves me towards him. Giovanni and Anthony Vincent own the small Italian Restaurant that Nancy and I have frequented most Wednesdays ever since they opened ten years ago. In fact, I seem to recall we were some of the first customers and the owners never have forgotten us. No matter how crowded they are, a decent table is always available.

"Hello, Lady, where is your friend today?" Gio asks as he leads me to a table. Other patrons who were waiting waste no time in loudly protesting to which Gio mumbles something that sounds like Italian cursing.

"She will be along, Gio. We have a third today, will that be a problem?"

"Of course not," he says as he speaks to the busboy, "Ottenga un altro posto che si regola per questa tabella subito."

The young man then brings another place setting to the table as Gio pulls out my chair. "Thank you."

"My pleasure Lady, I will send your friends back when they get here."

It isn't too long until I see Nancy's graying head of hair coming in my direction. Nanc has always been the

best dressed person I know and today is no exception. She has on a long dress with matching shoes and of course, her jewelry was coordinated too. We had first met when we both started working at the health department on the same day. She as the personal assistant to the Director of Health and I was just beginning as a social worker. We had gone through orientation and shared a table at lunch and have gravitated towards each other ever since. I remember when I first saw her she reminded me of Billie Jean King in stature and looks. Much to my surprise I found out that she was an avid tennis player and still is all these years later.

An instant smile crosses my friend's face when she sees me waving her over to the table.

"Where's your DC visitor?"

"Right behind me I hope. She and Gio were having a conversation in Italian and he said he would show her to the table when they were through." She smiles and winks at me, "she's a looker and you know how Gio likes the women."

Looking up I see the owner heading towards us talking animatedly to the most stunning woman I have ever seen. I am sure I must look like an idiot sitting here with my mouth open until Nancy asks, "Is something wrong?"

I quickly regain my composure and say, "No, I think your visitor is on her way." I nod my head in the direction of the two people who are about to arrive at the table.

"Here you are," Gio says as he pulls out a chair for the woman.

For someone who prides herself on never being taken by surprise, I am not prepared for the disarming smile or fond pat on the hand that the woman gives Gio. "Grazie."

"Prego."

That one word sets all my senses on edge. I'm not sure, if it is the sound of her voice, or the way the word seems effortlessly to run off her tongue, that catches my attention. The sense of déjà vous is so overwhelming that I am certain I have heard that voice before.

"Carol, this is Jacqueline Reinhart who is visiting from the Department of Health and Human Services." Nancy tries to sound nonplussed by the woman's importance, but I know she is impressed.

"Nice to meet you, Jacqueline," I direct towards the woman whose blue eyes are fixed on me.

She holds out her hand and I take it marveling at the softness and power. "Nice to meet you too, Carol, please call me Jack."

Reluctantly I let go of her hand. "Any special reason for your visit to our fair city, ah, Jack?"

The same disarming smile she gave Gio is now focused on me. "I am getting together a team to see if we can streamline any of the social services we offer both nationally and locally." She turns towards Nancy, "I am particularly impressed by the solid record of service this city is providing its citizens."

Obviously Nancy was under the woman's spell too for I see her blushing for the first time in twenty-five years. Nancy, in her capacity as assistant to the director of health services, acts as the liaison between the health department and the Mayor's office. It is because of the implementation of her plan that the department runs so smoothly.

"Jack has asked for a representative from our department to join her in DC next week to lend some ideas to a national program modeled after ours and several other cities." Nancy was interrupted with the vibration of her cell phone. "Sorry, I need to take this," she said as she looked at the caller ID.

If the truth were told, I am glad for the chance to be one on one with Jack. How can I describe this woman? For that matter, how can we describe anyone who

invades one's mind and body from an objective viewpoint? She is taller than my five foot six inches; probably around five eight or nine would be my guess. Her shoulder length hair is light brown or perhaps it has been highlighted, I'm not sure. The navy blue suit she is wearing accentuates her eyes making them bluer. They don't seem to be a true blue. I wonder if they change when she wears different colors. Her body is soft yet firm if that contradiction in terms is at all possible. I can tell that at one point in her life it was what one would consider a 'killer body'. Now, with time, it has gone a bit soft, but still tempts quite a few I am certain. I remember her walking into the restaurant and noticing her long shapely legs. Yes, she does tempt one. I am wondering where that came from as Nancy closes her phone.

"Sorry, Ladies, I must get back to the office... there seems to be a bit of an emergency that cannot be handled without me." She narrows her eyes then shakes her head. "Jack, I will leave you in Carol's capable hands until we meet around two in the third floor conference room." Nancy gives us a beleaguered smile as she stands up. "You, my friend," she says looking at me, "I will see later."

As I watch my dear, old friend walk away, I find myself glad she is going. What an odd feeling this seems for me...I want this magnificent woman all to myself. I can feel my cheeks get hot with the thought and quickly lift the menu up over my face.

"They have a very good antipasto salad Jack, if you are interested in something along that line. Also, they make a wonderful chicken parm sandwich if you feel like being decadent." I peer over the menu and see amused blue eyes. "Is something funny?"

Her hearty deep laugh makes my skin tingle. "Chocolate is decadent. I never heard anyone refer to anything chicken as decadent."

I can feel my face get hot with a blush as I wish the table would engulf me.

Once again, that disarming smile brightens her face. "That's cute."

"Cute? What's cute?" *Please let a tornado swoop down and get me out of here!* Is the prayer I send up to the weather gods.

"You ladies ready to order?" said the harried voice of our waiter.

I feel my body relax with the words. "Yes, I'll have a grilled chicken salad and a diet soda."

"And you, Miss?" the waiter says looking at Jack.

A wry smile crosses her lips. "I have it on good authority that your chicken parmesan sandwich is decadent."

"Oh, yes, Ma'am, it is the best in town."

Closing her menu, Jack hands it to the waiter. "Then that is what I shall have along with a cup of coffee."

"Good one," I say with a laugh.

When Nancy left, Jack never moved so she is still sitting next to me and now her eyes are fixed on me. They seemed to be searching and dissecting my inner being. Finally, when the waiter brings our drinks she looks away then speaks.

"I'm really glad that circumstances allowed us to have lunch together, Carol," she said softly, "I've been studying social services departments all over the country for the past three months. The one here is by far the most outstanding for productivity and retention. I was especially impressed with your department. How have you managed to have such a high case load ratio and such a low drop out rate of workers?" Her brow furrowed, "Nancy tells me it was your revamping of the system that made all the difference."

Again, I blush. "Nancy is a good friend, but her claims are a bit over zealous as it was a joint effort of everyone."

"Would you mind sharing?"

"Not at all. It is very simple really...once we figured out a man wrote the job descriptions."

I watch as Jack's face brightens in surprise. "A man is responsible for poor social services practices? Just how did you figure that one out?"

It is obvious, but glancing at her ring finger and seeing no ring, I figure she might not understand. "Whoever wrote the job descriptions obviously has never done any hands on social services work. Many job descriptions are written with unrealistic standards. I have often suspected that somewhere out there is a template of a blanket job description for all jobs. Besides, we all knew men always have to go around the barn six times before going in the front door."

She laughs. "You're probably right on that one. So, tell me, what changes did you make?"

Now it is my turn to look deep into her eyes because I want to know if I am being played or not. Finding no discernable deception, I open my pocketbook and take out a pen and a small notebook. "Let me draw you a diagram of how we saw the problem and how it could be corrected."

Soon our heads are together as I show her our plan while answering her thoughtful and knowledgeable questions. Our food arrives and goes untouched as our discussion occupies our every thought. Finally, Jack's cellphone rings startling us out of our intense dialogue.

"Jacqueline Reinhart." She is all business in her tone and manner yet, smiles when she looks in my direction. "I had no idea it was that late...I'll be there in ten minutes." Closing her phone, she looks at me apologetically. "Do you realize it is after two?"

I'm sure my eyes show my surprise. Have we really been sitting here for over two hours? Our food is still sitting on the table. "Wow, I had no idea. We never touched our food."

She reaches over and touches my hand, "I enjoyed every minute." Her hesitation seems uncharacteristic. "Do

you think we could get together for dinner and continue our discussion and maybe even eat our food?"

Something is happening to me that I can't put into words. The thought of Jack leaving is just as devastating as the idea of seeing her again. "Why don't you come to my house and have dinner with my husband and me?" I am surprised when she looks away.

"No, I can't do that." She puts a twenty on the table before getting up. "Perhaps another time then."

I am dumbfounded by this turn of events and quickly gather up my belongings and start after her. "Jack, wait up, I'm going the same way." She turns and in that one moment, I am lost, truly lost.

"Come on then, I'm late."

"Not to worry, I know a shortcut." For some reason unknown to me I take her hand and squeeze, "so where are you taking me for dinner tonight?"

There is that disarming smile again. "Shortcuts are good, but sometimes it is the long patient way that is the most rewarding. As for dinner, it will be someplace special."

Her voice is laced with such sensuality that I am finding it hard to speak. "This way," I say tugging on her arm as I point towards a side street. "This will put us directly in front of the building."

Standing in the crowded elevator, she leans over and whispers in my ear, "I'll stop by your office when the meeting is over and we can discuss dinner."

I turn, look at her and try to shake the feeling that we have met before. But, how can that be? We just met two hours ago. I watch as she exits the elevator and I am not sure my knees will continue to support me. Once the doors close and she is gone I am again lost.

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Entering my office my mind is in a whirl with thoughts and visions of Jack. Suddenly I remember where I had

seen her before and walk quickly to the stack of journals waiting to be read. I know it is here somewhere...damn which month was it? "Ah at last," I say to myself as I pull out the August 2002 issue. There on the front cover is a smiling Dr. Jacqueline Reinhart. **A Fresh Approach to Health Care Issues** the bold letters under her name declares.

Sitting down at my desk I begin to read the article when the phone rings. My stomach does a roll in anticipation of hearing Jack's voice. No such luck! Well it is back to the real world although I am not sure I will be able to concentrate with Jack floating around in my head.

I check my watch once more and it is indeed after five o'clock and no Jack. My stomach has a sinking feeling as I fight with myself about what to do. At four, I called Nancy's office and found she had left for the day. Distracting thoughts invade my mind. *Obviously, the meeting is over. Maybe Jack couldn't find my office. Now that is a ridiculous thought! I've been played...simple as that. All she wanted were my ideas; she got them so now I am history. What an idiot I am. Shit and I know better.*

"Damn," I say as I get my things together and head out the door for home.

Once home, I need to rush around making dinner as waiting for that *bitch* made me late. I hear the door open and watch as Mike walks into the kitchen before he kisses my cheek. For a moment, the sting of the afternoon is taken away until Jack's words creep into my mind once again. *I'll stop by your office when the meeting is over and we can discuss dinner.* Fortunately, I am chopping onions so the tears in my eyes are taken for just that.

"Something smells good," Mike says as he sneaks a taste of a tomato. "Thought you weren't going to be here."

"Hey, keep out of that it is all I have and it's for dinner. Plans changed so here I am making your meal." I know my tone is harsh and I am instantly apologetic.

"I'm sorry. It has been a bad day and I'm running late."

"No problem," he says as he hugs me. "Want to talk about it?"

"Not right now, maybe later."

I turn and look at Mike as he leaves the kitchen and find myself mystified by my reaction towards Jack. That wasn't me at lunch...it was someone else. It wasn't me turned on and lusting after a woman. No way! Yet, just thinking about Jacqueline Reinhart sends all my senses tingling. I let my defenses down and she used me. "Damn!" Now the tears are streaming down my cheeks and I'm not sure I can stop them. *Shit! Two fuckin' hours with that bitch and I'm shattered.* Breathing deeply I try to pull myself together so I can finish making dinner only to have a wave of sadness engulf my mind.

Mike has returned from changing his clothes and at last, I'm able to carry on in some other way than as if someone has died. He sets the table and I put the final additions on the hastily made dinner. I think of the salad I left on the table at lunch and realize I haven't eaten since breakfast. All of a sudden, I am ravenous as we sit down. Listening to Mike rattle on about his day I realize this is what is real, this is what my life is about and there is no room for anyone else. A vision of Jacqueline Reinhart crosses my mind.

Once again, I am lost.

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Dragging myself into my office, I am glad that no one knows what a fool I made out of myself over Jack. The sting of her rejection still smarts. *Like she owes me anything, she doesn't, but why do I think she was offering me something?* Why am I so drawn to her? Shaking my head, I sit down in my chair, look over my schedule for the day and pick up the phone to check my voice mail.

"You have six new messages," the generic woman's voice tells me. "First message..." I listen taking notes so I

can respond later. Then I hear, "Carol, this is Jacqueline Reinhart, I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you before you left. I was stuck with the Mayor until six-thirty and then by the time I got to your office you had left. Can I make it up to you by taking you to lunch today? Promise we will get to eat it this time. Call me."

My body is on fire as I listen repeatedly to her message, then I realize I have no idea how to get in touch with her. "Shit! Now what do I do? Nancy, I can call Nancy, but how do I ask for the number for a woman that I have no reason to call? Shit!" Deciding this needs a personal touch I head for Nancy's office.

Walking into Nancy's office, I am greeted by her smiling face. "Hey, what brings you to my neck of the woods?" she asked cautiously. "Someone hasn't let the cat out of the bag have they?"

I am confused by what she says. "Let the cat out of the bag? Nanc, you know I don't like cats. What in the world are you talking about?"

There is a look of pure joy on my friend's face. "Close the door please?"

I do as asked and sit in the offered chair. "What's going on, Nanc?"

She sits down next to me and pats my arm, "Something wonderful, Carol." Her smile broadens. "They want you to be part of the symposium on reforming the welfare system in DC next week. Jacqueline Reinhart asked for you personally."

I know I am sitting here with my mouth wide open, but I don't know what say. "I...I can't believe it. Why? Why me?" I am suddenly wondering why Jack asked for me and not Nancy.

"We spent all afternoon together then with the mayor until after six. The only thing that was agreed upon from the beginning was that you would be our representative at the symposium."

"You mean everyone thought that? You didn't have to convince them?"

"Nope, no convincing needed. They came from DC with your name on their lips my friend." Nancy's arm goes around my shoulders and she hugs me close.

To say I am in shock is an understatement. "Wow, this is unbelievable!"

"You deserve this, Carol. I'm so proud of you."

I am still trying to digest everything when I hear a knock on the door.

"Come," Nancy calls out.

Turning as the door opens, I see the vision known as Jacqueline Reinhart entering Nancy's office.

I quickly try to avert my eyes from staring at the woman standing there. Pushing myself up from my seat, I start towards the door. "I will leave you both to your work."

As I pass by, Jack gently takes hold of my arm and looks at me but speaks to Nancy. "Did you tell her, Nancy?" she asks of my friend.

"Of course," Nancy says with a pleased look on her face.

"And, will you be joining me in DC?"

"Of course she will!" blurts out Nancy. "Why wouldn't she? This is the chance of a lifetime for her."

Jack seems to be studying my face. "I only want her to be there if that is what she wants." Her words are close to a whisper before she seemingly regains her composure and releases my arm. The warmth of her touch lingers as she continues, "it will be counter productive if she goes only because it is a good career move." Her eyes focus on Nancy. "This symposium is too important to have the attendees just there as bodies; I need people who will give credible input and help find solutions."

Both of the women look in my direction and I feel taken aback by the intensity of the moment. Looking directly at Jack I answer, "I want to be there and learn as well as contribute."

Jack's face beams with a brilliant smile. "Terrific."

"I'll go now," I say as I reach the door.

"Carol, when I'm done here is it okay if I come by your office? We need to go over the itinerary."

The need to turn and look at Jack once again is overwhelming as I slowly turn back around. "I should be there all morning." Then, before either woman can detect my racing heart, I turn and leave.

The sound, the touch, the sight of Jack invades my every sense and once again, I am lost.

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Picking up the phone, I dial Mike's number. "Hi, guess what? I've been invited to a symposium next week in DC."

I can tell he is confused by my announcement. "Next week? For what?"

I go into detail about the meeting and how prestigious my appointment is.

"Congratulations, Sweetheart!" he exclaims, I can hear the pride in his voice. "What do you say I take my favorite girl out to dinner tonight and we can celebrate?"

"I was hoping you would say that." Bess Mitchell comes to my door, "Mike, I need to go," I motion Bess to come in, "I'll see you later, bye."

Sitting at my desk, I am trying to concentrate on the work at hand, but Jack keeps invading my thoughts. I try to figure out what is going on with me and realize I must feel like a young boy who just had his first erection. Every thought of Jack sets off such pleasurable feelings that I am sure if I die on the

spot it will be with a smile. She hasn't given me any indication that she feels the way I do, but that really doesn't matter. I would never act upon these emotions. I just couldn't...it is not in my nature.

Picking up the folder lying on my desk, I open it and begin familiarizing myself with Bess Mitchell's current case. Reading the report of neglect and hopelessness I wonder if the symposium next week will find a way to stop the downward spiral of some families. I can see why the dropout rate is so high among social workers; it is the depressing workload. I think the success of this department is partly because we use a team approach to each case. To a degree, this alleviates the tendency for one person to get so embroiled in a case that they lose track of their job and themselves.

I feel eyes upon me and look up to see Jack standing in the doorway. I smile, but for the life of me can't think of anything to say. She astounds me and I am finding that very disconcerting. I know her from somewhere I just can't seem to figure out where.

A smiling Jack moves further into my office. "Did you get my message about lunch?" she asks.

For a moment, I haven't any idea what she is speaking about, so much has happened since my arrival this morning. "Yes, yes I did," I say finally finding my voice. "Are we still on?"

"Absolutely!" She moves in even closer and I wonder if I will ever breathe again. "Why don't we go now and then we can spend the afternoon discussing next week." She hesitates, "If that's okay with you."

I turn my eyes away from her gaze for fear of mine betraying me. "Sounds good to me. I'll need to get the names of several hotels so I can make reservations." I am trying to sound casual and nonplussed by her presence.

"No need that has already been taken care of. You have a room at the Hotel Monaco on Capitol Hill." She seems pleased.

I really don't know what to say for this was not what I expected. "Ah, Jack, that is very nice, but I'm sure our budget can't afford that for a week. I'll need something less pricey."

Her laugh causes me to shiver. "It is already taken care of, Carol," she says as she moves towards the door.

"I don't understand. You must have gotten a really great discount for the symposium. Is that where the meetings are being held?"

"Shall we go?" she says winking at me. "I parked my car in the garage across the street."

"Don't you want me to drive?" I ask wondering why she didn't answer my questions.

Again, I hear that laugh and my knees go weak.

"Nope, I have made all the plans. After standing you up last night it's the least I can do."

"We just got our wires crossed that's all, no problem," I say not wanting her to know about the tears I shed.

She is an excellent driver as she maneuvers her rented red convertible out of the city. "You seem to know where you are going, Jack, did you grow up around here?"

She momentarily looks in my direction before looking back at the highway. "Yes, I know where I am going and no, I didn't grow up around here." She pauses as she comes to a stop sign and puts on the blinker. "I felt so bad when I was delayed last night that I scouted out the perfect place for lunch today. Of course I knew of your invitation to join the group in DC and wanted to take you some place special." Slowing the car, she turns into the restaurant.

I am shocked as I look at the sign. "Fuddruckers?" I'm astounded by her choice of lunch places.

"You should see your face," Jack says laughingly. "Are you disappointed?"

"No, no, not disappointed just surprised. This doesn't seem like your type of place," I say honestly.

"Just what do you think my type of place is?" Her voice sounds happy, but there is definitely a tinge of hurt too. "I thought that anyone who would describe chicken parmesan as decadent would enjoy a really good hamburger. We can go elsewhere if you like."

"Oh, no, I wasn't trying to insult you or object I'm just surprised that's all."

Suddenly Jack's voice takes on a cold tone. "I see. Maybe this wasn't a good idea, I'll take you back to the city." She turns the key to start the engine.

Panic is filling me as I try to figure out how to save the mess I just created. Reaching over I put my hand over hers poised on the key. "Look, Jack, I think we have a problem with words here. Can we start again? Please." She looks so defeated and my heart is breaking for her. "If it makes a difference, I love Fuddruckers. It is one of my favorite places 'cause they have kick ass onion rings."

Her face begins to soften as she turns towards me. "You aren't just saying that are you?"

I see a bit of a smile on her face and feel almost giddy. "No, once you get to know me better you will see I don't say anything unless I mean it." I see her lift her eyebrows in doubt. "Want me to recite the menu?"

Her eyes drift to my hand still on hers then back to my face. "This is one of my favorites too. I like to put what I want on the burger. Come on, let's go."

* * * * *

Lunch was a very pleasant experience, I think to myself as we head back towards the city.

Jack suggested we not talk about anything work related and I readily agreed. Instead, we began to get to know each other. I found her to be very forthright and with a wicked sense of humor. She is unmarried, which astonishes me because she seems like the sort that would be pursued. She said she just never found the right person and would rather live alone than with someone who did nothing for her. I would have guessed her age to be early forties and was surprised to find she was forty-eight.

Like me, she graduated with a degree in sociology and worked briefly for an urban health department. She quickly realized that wasn't for her and went back to school for her masters then her doctorate. She has been working for the Department of Health and Human Services for sixteen years and felt she is making headway in the revamping of the entire system. "Of course, bureaucracy being what it is, I will be long retired before they decide to change much. Still, who knows what great things might come out of the meetings next week?"

I was just getting to know Jack. She was so complex yet I had the feeling that what I saw was exactly who she was. She was intense yet didn't seem to take herself very seriously while at the same time I could feel her compassion. You can't have our type of jobs and not have altruistic feelings even if they are tucked deep inside. It wasn't hard to pick up on her intense opinions about her job and goals in life.

It was fascinating to listen to her talk. I found myself enthralled with the fluctuations of her voice. One minute it was light, then soft and sexy, then amused with the antics of a child sitting near us. I wanted to know everything about her and was disappointed when it was time to get back to work.

As we were leaving, I heard a song that caught my attention. I stopped so I could hear the words.

"What's the matter," Jack asked.

"This song is very interesting I was hoping to get some idea of what the title is."

Jack smiled. "Mystery solved...it is *Steal Your Love*, Lucinda Williams is the singer. I have the album if you'd like to hear it."

"Wow, yes, yes I would love to listen to it. Do you have it in the car?"

"If only, no it is back home I will let you have it when you get there. Do you like country/blues music?" she asked as we got in the car.

"Like all kinds really, but jazz and blues are a particular favorite. That singer has a very compelling voice doesn't she?"

She looked over at me and seemed to be trying to grasp something to say before she once again astounded me.

"That song goes something like this...*did they lay down a law and lock up your heart...I'm gonna have to steal your love. Some laws should be broken from the start...gonna have to steal your love. You ain't about to give it up for no one...gonna have to steal your love. I don't need a knife, I don't need gun...I know how to steal your love. I don't want your drugs, I don't want your money...I just wanna to steal your love. I want you to squeeze me and call me honey...I just wanna to steal your love. Give me your strong hand go away with me...I'm gonna have to steal your love. Come on and let me kiss you and set you free...I'm gonna have to steal your love...*"

Her voice was beautiful and the words strangely familiar and haunting. Once again, I felt lost.

* * * * *

Jack places her briefcase on a small table and opens it taking out several documents. "Carol," she says patting the chair next to her, "why don't you sit over here so we can go over the itinerary for next week."

I waste no time in doing as requested and sit in the seat next to her. "How many will be attending?" I ask curiously.

Jack cocks her head, "Good question. I was wondered when you would ask." A small smile quivers around her

mouth. "Actually the group is rather small, six maybe seven." She looks at me then continues, "Why does that surprise you?"

I can feel myself beginning to blush so I take a big gulp from my water bottle. "I always thought symposium meant more attendees."

A knock at the door interrupts our conversation. A man is standing there with a vase of roses. "May I help you?" I ask.

"You K. Barngate?" he asks.

"Yes," I say as I get up from my chair and go to him.

"These are for you."

The man hands me the vase and I dig in my pocket for something for a tip. Handing him two bills I take the roses and take a deep breath of the perfumed air they create. Placing the vase on my desk I take the card and read it...***I'm so proud of you. Love, Mike.***

"They're beautiful." Jack's voice startles me.

Smiling, I turn to the woman, "Thank you. They're from my husband." A pang of guilt crosses my mind as I look at her. Sitting back down, I nervously shuffle the papers around. "Now where were we?"

"I believe you were asking about the number of attendees," she smiles wryly. "This is a very select group. My purpose in this exercise is to develop a working plan and that can only be done with those that are dedicated to that end." Her eyes pierce me as they seemingly slice open my head and enter my brain. "You have no idea do you?"

"Idea? About what?" I am confused not only by the question, but also by the way she is looking at me. "Am I missing something?"

The disarming smile that I first saw at Vinny's reappears on her face. "You haven't a clue about your reputation nationally," she says with some surprise.

"You were the first one I thought of when this plan was in its infancy."

"How can that be? If I was that important why did you wait until the last week to invite me?" It is obvious to me that this woman was feeding me line of bull.

Jack once again penetrates me with her eyes. "Getting the top people in a field all together at one time for a week is a scheduling nightmare to say the least." She pauses, "I've been in contact with Ms Delarosa for several months now. Fortunately for me, the most important attendee has the most flexible schedule." She looks at me again and I think she can see the doubt in my eyes. "Okay, all BS aside, I thought you knew! It wasn't until I met with Nancy and the Mayor yesterday afternoon that I found out otherwise. When I spoke with them two months ago they assured me you would be available." Her eyes divert from mine; it is obvious she is clearly embarrassed by this revelation. "I'm sorry." As she looks back at me, I can see the sincerity on her face.

Finally, it hits me! What a fool I've been! Midlife crisis has snuck up on me and I didn't even realize it was happening. For the last twenty-four hours, I have let this woman invade my thoughts and yes, my body. I had some half baked idea about her and I having a tryst and all along, she was only interested in what I could bring to her symposium! Inwardly I laugh at how full of myself I am. *Like a woman like Jacqueline Reinhart would be interested romantically in me!*

"No need to be sorry, Ms. Reinhart. I will attend your symposium and lend whatever thoughts I can." I can feel my back stiffen as I stand up and move away from the table and the close contact with Jack. I want to run and hide the tears I feel welling up in not only my eyes, but my heart as well. I struggle to avoid looking at her so I won't to see the look on her face...I'm afraid of what might be there.

I can hear the confusion in her voice as she begins to speak. "I...I... Good, I am glad you will be joining us." I can hear her moving papers about and closing her briefcase. "I'll fax you the itinerary and directions to the hotel."

I hear her walk towards the door and I want to call out her name but don't. She is gone and I finally allow myself to look at the space she just occupied. My heart skips a beat when she appears in the doorway once again. Our eyes meet and it is then that I see the hurt and sadness in hers.

"Have I done something to upset or offend you?" she asks pointedly.

Now it is my turn to be at a loss for words. Do I tell her the truth? Do I tell her that I have been fantasizing about her? Tell her how my body reacts to the thought of her or her being in the same room?

"No, no, you haven't done anything, Jack." I can feel my eyes darting around the room as I try to think of something half way sensible to say. "It isn't you. I am put out with Nancy, who is supposed to be my friend, for leaving me out of the loop on this."

Her eyes search mine. "Are you sure that is all?"

I nod my head, afraid if I speak, my voice will betray me.

"Good." She smiles. "Will you call me and tell me your flight number so I can meet you and take you to the hotel?"

My body is trembling as our eyes meet once again. I can feel myself being pulled in by her powerful yet sincere gaze. "Yes, I will. I'm looking forward to being part of this." I am powerless to deny any request she makes of me; I am a willing participant in everything that is Jack.

"I'm looking forward to working with you." She raises her arm and looks at her wrist watch. "My flight leaves in three hours so I need to get going. Security and all that stuff..." She smiles that smile again. "We're okay, aren't we?"

"Yes," I manage to eek out.

The look on her face is glorious. "I'm happy. Let me know your arrival time." She waves as she turns and heads towards the exit.

Standing there, I stare at the doorway and the feeling of being lost is overwhelming.

* * * * *

Thursday is a blur to me. With every case I review and every conversation I have, Jack invades my mind. Sitting at my desk I am reading a report and a memory from long ago occupies my mind. I remember one hot summer night when I was about eleven or twelve and a friend Betty something or another is spending the night. We are lying in my bed and she is saying something about men and woman making love and then she is on top of me and we share a kiss. Hmm, I haven't thought of that since it happened and now it is as clear as a new morning. I remember how pleasurable the kiss felt that fact that it was another girl didn't seem to bother me. Thinking back, I can also remember having a huge crush on an older girl named Ethel, everyone called her 'E'. I feel a smile come on my face as I remember drawing a picture of her. I remember proudly showing it to my friends.

I guess at the time I knew nothing about lesbians or their lifestyle. An innocent time when, as a child, I did what came naturally without any thought of recrimination. Now, here I am forty odd years later and the thought of making love to Jack terrifies yet excites me. I wonder how this can be. Over the years I have flirted with men even kissed a few but never considered going to bed with them. Yet, this woman, Jacqueline Reinhart, who has not made any type of overture in my direction, is constantly on my mind. The thought of her makes me wet and so turned on that I feel the need to cross my legs constantly. There is no doubt in my mind that if asked I would bed her in a minute. She has awoken feelings, thoughts and desires in me that I have long suppressed.

I am brought out of my daydreams with the ringing of my phone. "This is Carol," I say.

"Hello, Carol, this is Jacqueline Reinhart."

Her voice sends me reeling as I feel myself come. Catching my breath I respond, "Jack, how nice to hear from you. Has there been a change of plans? I faxed you my flight plans this morning. Is there a problem?" I can feel myself rattling on as I try to cover up just how disconcerting her call is.

Her laugh is like music to my ears. "No, nothing has changed and yes, I received your fax. I just wanted to touch base with you and see what you think about the group as a whole?"

I am taken aback by her wanting my opinion on the other attendees. "To be honest with you, I have looked over the list and there are only two names I recognize."

"Helen Burstein and I attended three conferences together...ah, she spoke at one and I remember being very impressed with her results and the creativity of approach in problem solving."

"Yes, that was my take on her also...and the other?" she asked in a very professional tone.

I hesitate wondering how to speak of Ron Cuthbert without sounding judgmental or harsh. "I would rather not say if that is okay with you." I hear an intake of breath that tells me it is not what she wants to hear. "Guess not," I say as I swallow hard and continue, "There's one name on the list that worked here for a time."

"I am aware of that." Her matter-of-fact voice told me she wanted to know more.

Now what do I do? I know she wants me to tell her my opinion, but how can I do that? "Listen, Dr. Reinhart...Jack, I just don't feel comfortable about this. Obviously, the person must have some good points or you wouldn't have invited him to the symposium. My opinions are based on a person I worked with twenty years ago. People change as I am sure this person has."

Jack's laugh is rich, "Very diplomatic," she pronounces, "and you managed never to say the name."

I can hear her still chuckling as I start to speak, "Sorry, have I disappointed you?"

"No, not at all." I can hear her shuffling papers. "Actually..."

I sit patiently waiting for her to continue, but she is silent. "Actually what, Jack?"

I hear a deep intake of breath before she speaks again, "I was wondering if when you get here Sunday...well...I have tickets for the symphony that evening..."

"Oh, I can take a taxi don't worry about picking me up if you have other plans," I hastily say.

"No! That is not what I meant. I wanted to know if you would like to go with me...it's no fun going alone," her voice is tentative and halting as she speaks.

Now, it is my turn to be quiet, as I am trying to digest what she just said. *Is she asking me out on a date?* I wonder. "Jack, I love the symphony and would be happy to go with you." I think I am gushing.

I can hear the smile in her voice, "That's great." Again, there is a long pause, "Beethoven," she blurts out, "it is an all Beethoven night."

"Oh, I love his music especially the sixth symphony." I am sure I have a big goofy smile on my face. "Thank you for thinking of me," I say sincerely.

"It was easy to do," she said before adding, "I mean I am picking you up and all so it seems you are the perfect one to invite...I mean..."

"I know." That is all I can think of to say because something deep inside of me understands exactly what she is trying to tell me.

"Yes, I believe you do. See you on Sunday, Carol. Take care."

"I'm looking forward to next week. Thanks. Bye."

"Bye," was all she said before she was gone.

Hanging up the phone my fingers linger on the receiver as I stare into space. She didn't say the word *date*, but I know that is exactly what she meant. *I have a date with Jacqueline Reinhart to go to the symphony on Sunday!*

I can feel my heart beat rapidly with the realization of what might happen. At the same time, I feel devastating fear.

Again, I am lost.

* * * * *

Our SUV is heading down the highway towards the airport. I look over at Mike and notice his strong features. I remember when I first saw him I thought he looked so handsome. The years have been kind to him. He is my rock in so many ways. I do love him.

Turning my head, I look out the window at the other cars all jockeying for lane position as we reach the airport. "You can let me off at the curb," I say. "It's ridiculous to pay for the parking garage."

Mike laughs, "I think I can manage to scrape together the money." He reaches over and takes my hand, "can't have my best girl carrying her own bags and going off without a kiss."

He is so kind and loving...always has been. I wish I could say the same for myself. I wonder if there can be too much goodness in a person. Sometimes I feel like I am being suffocated by Mike's kindness.

"Okay, have it your way," I tell him as we enter the short term parking area.

I've checked my bags and have my ticket, as we get on the up escalator. Mike takes my hand and holds it as we walk the long corridor towards the entrance to the gates. We get behind the last person in line and move towards the security area.

Turning to my husband, I smile, "looks like it's my turn next. I'll call you when I arrive and let you know the room number." I see sadness in his eyes. "You're okay with this, aren't you?"

He smiles and hugs me close. "Yep, I'm proud of you, Babe." He leans over and kisses me goodbye. "Remember to call," he says as I enter the cordoned off area.

Turning towards him, I smile and blow him a kiss just before I put my carry-on bag and purse on the conveyor belt.

Walking towards my gate, I feel conflicted. Part of me is sad to be leaving while the biggest part is brimming with excitement. Jack's face invades my mind as I sit and wait to board the plane.

The captain's voice brings me out of my daydreaming as he announces our imminent arrival at BWI. I am terrified yet excited; if Jack makes any kind of move in my direction, I will not discourage her. A part of me that wants Jack yet another hopes it never happens.

Emerging from the gate area, I see Jack standing squarely in front of the people gathered there. She looks so hot that I can feel myself becoming wet with excitement. I wave to her and our eyes meet and hold each other's as I shorten the distance between us. As we meet, she smiles that smile and then engulfs me in a hug.

"Don't you just love airports?" she asks me as she releases me. There is no apology or embarrassment on her part for her greeting. "I have been here for an hour just watching the people. It is fascinating." She weaves her hand under my arm and we begin to walk towards the baggage area. "You can see all the emotions here; people are happy, sad, tired, irritated...if it can be felt, people at airports feel it."

"Sounds like you study them often," I say trying to combat the overwhelming urge I have to take her in my arms and kiss her.

"Oh, I love to people watch." She motions to the baggage carousel, "looks like they are unloading your plane now. What do your bags look like?"

I stop and stand still until she realizes I am no longer next to her. She turns around with a perplexed look on her face then walks back towards me. I am in awe of her as I study her face trying to remember her. There is a familiarity there, I know I have seen her turn and look at me like that before. *Why can't I remember?* "Damn," I whisper squeezing my legs together as she gets closer.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

I begin laughing. "Jack, I can get my own bags." I hold up my arms, "see they both work."

"Too much, huh?"

"Just a bit."

She begins to laugh.

"There, that green one is mine!" I shout.

I step back and watch as Jack, disregarding my protestations, effortlessly whisks my bag off the revolving rack. She is a vision of fluid motion and my heart beats with happiness at being here with her. For once in my life, I am going to let life take me where it will. No plans, no backup just go with the flow. If Jack and I are to be lovers, it will be if not, then maybe we will become very good friends. A sense of sadness fills me with the last thought.

"Ready to go?" Jack asks.

Her voice is like music to my ears. "Yes, ready to go with you anywhere." Looking at her, I see her cock her head. "Is something the matter?" I ask.

She hesitates as if she is studying me then smiles, "No. Everything just as it should be." Her voice is soft and sensual or so I think. Hell, I think everything about her is hot and desirable. Suddenly I am filled with such a strong desire to run and hide.

What the hell am I doing here thinking these thoughts about Jack? Except for the hug, she has given no indication she wants me or even thinks of me in that way. I am acting like a dope!

I am terrified and lost.

* * * * *

The room is magnificent. Never have I seen such opulence in one hotel room. Every amenity is provided right down to a plush robe and a goldfish. "Jack, this is absolutely fabulous!" I can't hide my enthusiasm. "How can your department afford something like this for your attendees? You must have gotten some discount." I wander about the room running my fingers over the rich wooden surfaces and gawking at the high ceilings.

"This building was once the Tariff Building. It was converted into a hotel and opened two years ago." She smiles. "There's lots of history in this building and preserving that was one of the stipulations for the remodeling." Her voice is so soft that I turn to see if she is really speaking. The look on her face is one of happiness as she describes the hotel. "Are you pleased with the room, Carol?" she asks.

"Oh, yes, it is wonderful. What do the others think...I bet they are just as astounded as I am?"

A strange look crosses Jack's face before it becomes a brilliant red. "I'm not real sure where the others are staying they are on their own."

Her eyes avoid mine and I suddenly realize the implications of those words. "Oh, Jack." I struggle not to go to her and pull her into a hug.

She saves me from possibly humiliating myself. "Listen, I've got to go and get ready for the concert. Would you like to have dinner before?"

"Do we have time?" I look at my watch and realize the symphony doesn't start for several hours. "I would love to have dinner with you, Jack. Would you be my guest?" Yep, I'm asking her out on a date and cross

the fingers that are plunged deep in my pocket that she will say yes.

There's that look again and I melt as I see a smile begin to play around the corners of her mouth. "Hmm, may I ask...is this a friendly meal or something else?"

I know I have a goofy look on my face as I cast my eyes to the ground before pinning her with them. "Would you like it to be more?"

"Yes," she whispers.

My feet are closing the distance between us. "So would I." We are within arms length. "Will you be my date for dinner tonight, Jack?"

Jack's arms surround me as she pulls me close to her. She whispers in my ear, "I'd love to."

Then her lips are on mine and I melt into her mouth willingly. The kiss ends and I find myself wanting to feel Jack's kiss again so I lean in for more, but she pulls away.

"I better get going while I still can," her voice is playful and relaxed. "Can you be ready in an hour? I will make the dinner reservations if that's okay with you."

Reluctantly, I step back several steps creating the space that I desperately need. "Yes, to both." My heart is thumping so hard in my chest I am sure she can see its rise and fall.

She moves closer to me and leans in to kiss my cheek tenderly. "Thank you," she says softly before turning to leave.

My hand reaches up and touches my cheek and I am lost.

* * * * *

I can't take my eyes off her as we eat dinner. Actually, I think I have been secretly watching her ever since we met. There is something about her that is so familiar...it is as if we have met before. I know

it sounds strange, but I know Jack; I know her very well.

"I have this strange feeling that I know you from somewhere, Jack."

She smiles and reaches across the table to touch my hand. "It was about five years ago in Dallas. That's where I first saw you...at a SWOA conference. You were giving a speech on the ethical and emotional support for battered women." Her fingers slide back and forth across mine. "I had just wandered in there to find an associate and was so enthralled by your thoughts and ideas that I didn't want to leave until you were done and I could speak with you personally."

"I'm usually pretty good with faces, Jack; I don't remember ever meeting you there or anywhere else."

"You didn't. There were so many people surrounding you I couldn't even get close." She withdraws her hand as a distant look crosses her face. "I can still feel the pang of disappointment I felt when I watched as you left the auditorium. Like you feel now I felt then...I knew you, Carol...I knew you, but don't know how."

I watch the emotions cross her face and know that she is speaking the truth. "Well, now that you've met me up close and personal do you still *know* me?"

"I've always known you." A look of peace and happiness fills her face as if she just realized a truth she never knew. "As much as I hate to say this...we really do need to get going."

Nodding my head, I slide my chair back and get up. Jack is instantly at my side placing her hand in the small of my back as she guides me towards the exit.

The symphony is more than I could have ever hoped for in many ways. Sitting next to Jack and listening to the Pastoral is exhilarating. I've never been a feely-touchy type of person and abhor those that are, but I can't help but touch her often. It is not sexual. It is more of a need to connect with her - to be one with her - as it should be.

We arrive back at the Hotel Monaco and silently ride the elevator up to my floor. I can feel the butterflies in my stomach in anticipation of what will happen next. All night Jack has been attentive and flirtatious making me quake with the need of her.

Standing at the open door, I motion her inside, "how about a nightcap?"

Jack steps inside and I close the door. We are but inches apart as she moves closer still and takes me in her arms. Our kiss is soft and unhurried as we seemingly melt into each other. Her mouth explores mine and I respond wanting and needing more.

She pulls away and smiles as her fingers run through my hair. I am on fire with desire and move in for another kiss only to have her turn away.

"I need to go."

I don't know what to say. Breaking the contact I have with her I ask, "I don't understand. Why?"

"Big day tomorrow. Right now that has to be my only focus." She once again moves closer to me and lightly kisses my cheek. "There will be a car for you in the morning to take you to department."

I can only stand there with what I am sure is a startled look on my face. Words are lost as I watch her open the door before disappearing as it closes.

What just happened? I move to the door and touch the handle battling with myself until I open it. Stepping out into the corridor, I look towards the elevator only to see the doors closing and taking Jack away.

Back in my room, I am unmoving, stunned and devastated. The flashing of the message light on the phone finally gets my attention. Numbly I listen to the message. It is from Mike telling me goodnight. "Oh God," I cry out as I remove my clothes letting them fall to the floor. Crawling under the cool sheets my naked body quivers not only from cold but also from disappointment. Tears fall from the corners of my eyes

landing in a puddle on the pillowcase. Jack has gone and I am here alone, unfulfilled and completely lost.

* * * * *

I'm not sure when or if I fell asleep. The only thing I am certain of is the insistent ringing of the phone. My eyes open and I see the clock, 7:00, and realize that that is my wake up call. I pick up the receiver and return it to the cradle. Stretching, I remember the night before and I am filled with an overwhelming sense of sadness. Automatically I throw the covers back and sit up with my legs dangling over the side of the bed. I feel myself sighing as I walk into the bathroom...its going to be a long day and an even longer week.

Just as I finish blow drying my hair I hear a knock at my door. *Jack!* A momentary sense of joy fills me as I open the door only to see a man with a tray standing there.

"Your breakfast, Ma'am," he says as he carries a tray into the room and places it on the table. "Please," he gestures towards the chair he has pulled out.

"I didn't order this!"

"You are Ms. Barngate in room 325."

I nod my head.

"Then this is for you. Please be seated."

I do as requested and sit down while the man uncovers the meal. Yogurt, a banana, toast with peanut butter and a diet Coke. I laugh hazily remembering telling Jack at one point the night before what I had for breakfast.

"Perfect." I look at the waiter in question, "shouldn't I sign something?"

"It been taken care of, Ma'am," he speaks as he begins to leave the room.

"Can you wait a moment so I can tip you?"

"Taken care of," he says as he closes the door.

I can't help the goofy smile I am sure I have on my face as I pick up the toast and take a bite. All the hurt of the night before is forgotten by this one small gesture. Truth be told I don't think I could ever be upset too long by anything Jack does.

Entering the conference room, I see Jack speaking with one of the attendees. It is as though she senses me there for her eyes immediately lock on mine. There's that smile again and I feel myself melt into her gaze. Whatever last night was about doesn't matter now for I am captivated once again by that which is Jack.

"Good I see we are all here now." Jack speaks and the entire room listens. "I know some of you are acquainted and all have information about each other, but I think it would be good for us each to introduce ourselves before we begin. Carol, will you begin?"

It is not until I see the quirky smile on the face that has my full attention that I realize she is speaking to me.

"Oh, okay...hmm...I'm Carol Barngate from..."

"Somehow, the past seven hours have flown by. That is a definite sign of a great meeting," I say to Jack after the others have left. We are all to meet up at a local watering hole, Madam's Organ, for drinks then dinner.

"It did go well, didn't it? I think we have an eclectic group of high thinkers." She smiles. "This is going to be a good week."

"Yes it is." I look around trying to think of a reason to stay and be with Jack. "Do you need any help?" Our hands reaching for the same paper touch and I feel my body react strongly.

"Do you want me to pick you up and take you to the bar?"

"That would be wonderful, thanks." I smile at her and wonder if tonight will be the night."

Madam's Organ is one of those places you have to experience at least once in your life. The place is outrageous and draws you in with the blues soulfully calling out your name. Some of the walls are hot pink - or is that magenta - with neon helping to assault the senses and putting me in a party mood.

Jack and I make our way up the stairs to the *love lounge* and find the others already seated with drinks in hand.

Ron Cuthbert is immediately out of his chair and at Jack's side. He has been unabashedly flirting with her all day and takes this opportunity to make a move.

"Hey, glad you finally got here now, the party can start." He motions to the chair next to his, "There's an empty seat just waiting for you."

"Thanks, Ron, but I think Carol and I will sit over here." She takes my arm and we take two seats next to each other.

Ron just stands there embarrassed, but true to his obnoxious nature rebounds, "Hey, Carol do you remember back in the old days when we would go to the bar across the street from work...what was the name..."

"The Chalet," I offer.

"Yeah, that's it."

Just then, the waiter arrives, distracting Ron and saving me a walk down memory lane.

Throughout dinner, I watch as the others are drawn to Jack much as they had been during the day. Hell, who wouldn't be she is awesome. I discreetly watch her face as I place my hand on her thigh. A small satisfied smile crosses her face before her hand finds its way to rest on mine. Every so often during the day, I was pulled to her; the need just to connect and touch her is overwhelming. I am probably channeling my own feelings, but I think she feels the same way for she leans into me whenever I am near.

The nature of the job makes social workers need release and this night at Madam's is no exception. The group gets along very well as the drinks and food flow. Unfortunately, Ron hasn't forgotten that Jack picked me over him and once again rekindles the past.

"Way back when," he starts, "Carol here and I worked together...I think it was both our first jobs." He takes a long draw of his beer. "Anyway, every night after work we would go to this bar, the Chalet, and relax. Do you remember, Carol?"

I nod my head and roll my eyes.

"This woman," he points to me, "could drink anyone in the place under the table. We devised a game called *you buy* where everyone would cut a deck of cards and the lowest card would have to buy the highest a shot. Damn if this one always won." His eyes challenge mine. "Can you still do that, Carol? Always wondered if it was a trick or you were just fuckin' lucky."

The man is a jerk and although I have matured in the thirty or so years since I last saw him, I am up to the challenge. "I out did you then and can again, Ron. Do you have a deck of cards?"

It is as though he had hoped this would happen for her pulls a deck out of his pocket and hands it to Jack. "Care to shuffle? We've got to have this on the up and up."

Skillfully Jack shuffles the deck and places it face down on the table. Everyone leans in closer. Ron opens his hand and motions, "Ladies first."

I know I have a eat my shit grin on my face as I cut the deck and lift my draw up for all to see...a ten of hearts.

Ron sighs and laughs, "Oops, I seem to remember you only drew face cards." He then picks up the very next card and shows the table...a five of clubs.

"Looks like you buy the shot, Ron." I am smug, but he had it coming to him.

Unfortunately, now everyone wants to try...six shots later and I still haven't bought a drink. That is when Jack takes over. "Are you ready to go?" she asks me.

The drive back to the hotel is quiet. I can't help but wonder if tonight Jack and I will find our way to each other again. She pulls her car near the entrance and stops and I realize her plan is to drop me off.

"Want to come up for a nightcap?" I ask desperate for one moment more.

"No, I'm going to call it a night."

This can't be happening...the hands touching, the tender looks, her constant attention...she can't be leaving! I lean over to her and kiss her cheek. "Please come up with me."

For a long moment, she gazes at me. "Carol, I make it a rule not to take advantage of someone who has had too much to drink."

Now it is my turn to stare. "I'm not drunk!" My tone is harsh and I am instantly sorry. "I know I had a lot of shots, but I'm fine, really."

"Was it a trick or did you just get lucky seven times?"

I laugh mostly out of relief that she hasn't left yet. "It is a gift."

"A gift, ah huh," she laughs. "I need to get going...we have another long day tomorrow and I'm not used to these late nights."

I reach over and take her hand avoiding looking at the eyes. "Please don't go."

She lifts my hand to her lips and kisses it tenderly. "I have to, Carol, I'm sorry."

Savagely I pull my hand from hers and open the door. I will not let her see me cry. Getting out of the car, I slam the door then walk with purpose to the entrance all the while hoping to hear a car door open and her

footsteps. I do not. Once in my room I sit poised on the bed for the knock at the door that never comes.

While taking off my jacket, shirt, jeans and underwear tears are streaming down my face. I am a stupid old woman with fantasies about someone who only wanted to play with my emotions. Never again will I allow Jacqueline Reinhart to hurt me!

My tears flow freely and I am lost.

* * * * *

Wednesday's meeting is the most productive so far. All day I have watched as Jack expertly guides the group. She is amazing with a quick understanding of concepts and thoughtful contemplation of solutions.

I am paired up with Harold Sampson a balding man in his mid forties who is the director of social services of a large Midwestern city. We are working on the restructuring of divisions and need to get a handle on one last section. No matter where we put the Medicaid division it seems to cause problems in other areas. I don't know how to explain the connection I feel with Jack, but I can feel her standing silently behind us...watching...taking in everything.

Finally, she leans in between us resting her hand on my shoulder. I wonder if she feels my body tremble and my heartbeat increase. If she does, she makes no indication as she points to one of the groupings on our chart.

"What would happen if you moved this one under the auspices of the director?"

Harold and I look at one another. "That would work then we can make social services an independent grouping."

Jack's hand still rests on my shoulder as she straightens back up. When she removes it, the feelings of loss are unbearable. I want to run and hide somewhere as I feel tears threaten to flow once again.

It is at that moment that our dinner orders arrive and I am grateful for the opportunity to excuse myself. I walk rapidly down the hallway to the rest room. Once inside the stall I bolt the door hoping this will lock out all the emotions raging through my body and mind. This morning I was determined to rid myself of Jack, but I have failed miserably. Her hold on me is stronger than ever. Sitting on the toilet, I bury my face in my hands as the tears begin once again.

I hear the door open and realize I need to pull myself together and stop acting like a love sick puppy dog.

"Carol, are you okay?" Jack's voice asks quietly.

SHIT!! "Yes," I say weakly trying to disguise the weepiness of my voice. I wipe the tears away pull up my pants and stand up. Once I've gotten myself together, I emerge from my hideaway to see Jack standing there.

She is instantly by my side as I wash my hands. "What's the matter?" she asks softly her head tilting to look at me.

"Nothing." I take a deep breath frantically trying to control my shaky emotions.

"Carol," her voice is so soft and soothing, "why have you been crying?"

I clench my teeth, breath deeply and straighten my back. "I'm fine." I'm not and I can tell she is not buying my story, but I push past her and open the door. "Our meals are getting cold...we should go now." I continue out the door and head back to the conference room. Five minutes later, Jack returns and joins in as if nothing has happened. I am grateful, for at this point, I am too fragile for anything emotional.

Finally, the day is ended and we all begin to pack up our belongings and head back to our various hotels. I am looking forward to a long, hot bath and a chance to be alone. Mostly I want to be away from the influences of Jack.

"Carol, could you give me a minute?" Jack asks just as I reach the door.

Damn! I really have no choice but to turn and respond. The others are still in the room and I certainly don't want them to know my true feelings. I walk back into the middle of the room and Jack who is standing there.

I look into the beautiful face and see stress and what I think must be exhaustion. My heart goes out to her, but I will not go down that path again. Strictly professional is my new motto. "I think we made great headway today."

Her eyes look towards the door and the last of the participants leaving. "Yes, tomorrow we should be able to have a working model. I'm pleased."

We stand for a few minutes. "If that's all I need to get going a hot bath is calling my name." I deliberately take a step back distancing myself from the woman.

"What's going on?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Jack. As far as I know nothing is happening or going on...I came here to attend your symposium nothing more." I can feel the edge of coldness in my voice. I take the tone I use with uncooperative clients. *I will not let her in! Never again.*

She tries to move closer to me, but I move away. "Will you have a drink with me? I really think we need to talk."

"There's nothing to say, Jack."

"Please," her voice is so soft with an urgency that I have not heard before.

No matter how hard I try, I cannot stop the tears from flowing. "I can't it hurts too much," I finally reveal.

She attempts to put her arms around me, but I stop her, "Don't."

"What hurts too much, Carol, please tell me."

Through my tears I shriek, "Your rejection of me."

Except for my occasional sobs, the room is deathly quiet. Unable to look at Jack, I turn away and start for the door and escape from this emotion of grief.

"It's not rejection," she finally says.

Now I'm pissed off and I face her as anger flares. "It sure hurts and feels like rejection. Obviously, I misunderstood your actions. It will not happen again. Now if you don't mind I need to go!"

I can see the mystified, hurt look on her face, but I will not let myself be dissuaded as I leave the room. As I walk towards the entrance, her face, as I left, floods my mind.

"No, I will not let her do this to me again," I say shoving the heavy door open and stepping out into the night air. I look around and realize I will have to walk back to the hotel. *Not a great choice* my inner voice says to me. I see a taxi approaching and flag it down; fortunately it stops and I open the door.

As the cab pulls away, I see Jack exit the building, our eyes lock for an instant and deep in the recesses of my soul, I am alone and lost.

* * * * *

It is Thursday and I awaken to the insistent pounding on my door. Groggily I get out of bed, the Southern Comfort of the night before now pounding inside my brain. "Who is it," I say softly although my ears and head register it as shouting.

"Jack."

"Jack, what's she doing here?" I say to myself as I open the door. Yep it's Jack standing there with a startled look on her face. "What are you doing here?"

"When you didn't show up for the meeting I was worried. May I come in?"

I'm still not sure what she is talking about, but I motion for her to enter. "What meeting?"

Jack is now looking at me with a puzzled look. "Are you okay?" I see her eyes darting around the room seemingly unwilling to look at me.

I am sure my eyes opened wider than an owl's as I suddenly realize what she is talking about. "God, what time is it?" My eyes squint as I try to make out the time on the radio...9:30. "Shit! The alarm didn't go off." I turn around so fast that I feel myself begin to fall only to be stopped in mid-air as Jack's strong arms engulf me. It is then that I realize I am naked and the woman who has filled my every thought for the last week is holding me in her arms.

I can feel a hot flush cover my face. "Guess I'd better get dressed."

Jack only laughs. "Actually I kinda like you this way." Her voice is light and playful.

My arms encircle Jack as I move my lips close to hers. She offers no resistance when our lips touch tenderly repeatedly assaulting in small sensuous kisses. Repeatedly we kiss, each intensifying, more insistent, needier until our tongues meet. I am drowning in Jack wanting nothing more than to melt into her and become one. I can feel her finger tips running up and down my bare back as my need for her escalates.

"Make love with me," I whisper.

She doesn't break contact, but says, "No."

"Please, Jack...please." I am begging her and I don't care for I want her so bad.

"No, we can't."

"Why? Please, I want you."

"I want you too, but we can't. The others are waiting for us...we need to go."

Reality suddenly grips my heart and I push away from her grabbing for the bedcover to wrap around me.

"Excuses! You are filled with them, Jack! What one comes next? I've got a headache."

"Carol, we need to talk. Will you have dinner with me tonight? I promise to answer all your questions."

"Questions, I don't have any, Jack. You've made your feelings perfectly clear; there is no need for explanations or to have dinner." Tears begin to flow without restraint. "Look at this," I say pointing to the liquid streaming down my cheeks, "I don't cry for anyone nor do I beg!" Anger overtakes the passion I was feeling only moments ago. "I don't know what you want from me nor do I care anymore! I won't let that happen again...it hurts too much." I turn my back to her as I start for the safety of the bathroom. "I need to get ready, I will be there within the hour...you can show yourself out."

Defiantly, she answers, "I will wait and take you."

As I close the door, I hear her speaking into her cell. "Carol is a bit under the weather you all carry on..."

Arriving in the conference room, I can once again feel my face flush with embarrassment. "I am so sorry to cause everyone this delay."

"It's not a problem, Carol, please take a seat and we will get started." Jack is all business.

These are the first words I hear her speak since we left my hotel room and I am taken aback by the compassion in her voice. I covertly look at her as she goes through all the statistics and ideas we developed over the last few days. Although her voice is strong and words positive I can hear a defeated undertone. *Is this because of me? She tried to talk to me and I refused to listen. What would it hurt to hear what she has to say?* A pang of sadness stabs at my heart as I look at her. Tomorrow I will be gone never to see her again, never to know what she wanted to say. *I can't let that happen.*

I know Jack. I can feel the rightness of that in the depths of my heart and soul. We may have only met a little over a week ago, but I know her in the most basic of ways. I have known her for all time through all the ages of that I am certain.

Where Jack is concerned I seem to have no control. Just when I think I have broken her spell, I find myself melting with the sound of her voice or her mere presence.

We break for lunch and I approach Jack. She is speaking with Ron who is fawning all over her in his ridiculous macho man way. Jealousy! I feel jealousy and want that scum bag to back off. I inch closer and capture Jack's eyes pleading with her to rid herself of the jerk. She only turns her attentions back to Ron and smiles sweetly.

The message she sends me is clear and I begin to move away knocking over a chair. Shit! Can this day get any worse? Regaining my composure, I look back at Jack to see a bemused expression on her face. Ron is no where in sight, the room is empty and she is watching me the look in her eyes unmistakable. I melt once again my feet moving in her direction with a mind of their own. Standing only inches away from her, I can feel my heart beating uncontrollably while the warm, wonderful sensation of lust fills my body.

"What time are you picking me up for dinner?" I quietly ask. "I have to warn you ahead of time, I'm not a cheap date."

The laugh is glorious, "I never thought you were."

Jack takes me to a small out of the way restaurant where the tables are set apart in small secluded coves. She pulls the chair out for me and then sits in the chair next to me.

"Do you like my choice of dining establishments?"

I look around the dimly lit area appreciating the ambience and realizing exactly why we are here. "Yes, it is very intimate." I shake my head, "Yes, I like it very much."

There is that smile again and I know I am falling for her all over again. Any protestations I had earlier in the day are forgotten as I bask in the glow of what is Jack. She has me totally mesmerized by her presence.

The level of comfort I feel when I'm around Jack is a surprise to me. "You know, Jack, it is like I have always been with you," I tell her over desert.

"I know exactly what you mean." She looks at me for what seems like ages before she speaks again.

"Remember when I told you I had seen you at a conference several years ago?"

I nod my head wondering how different my life may have been had she actually spoke to me.

"When I opened the door the first thing I heard was your voice and that is what drew me in. I remember your words, *'If we ignore what has happened in the past we never will recognize what is familiar about now..'* Something deep inside me was crying out to listen to the beautiful music that your voice elicited in me. I had heard you before deep in a memory...perhaps a dream, but I knew you." She takes a long sip of her wine. "Then, when I saw your face my heart rejoiced for it knew I had found what I had been searching for all my life."

Her words are heart felt and I know the truth behind them for I had much the same reaction when we first met last week. "I look at you and I have to catch my breath. I study your face as my mind tries to figure out how and where I know you from." I take my hand and hold it over my heart. "You are here and always have been."

Jack reaches out and takes my hand oblivious to where she is or who might be watching. Slowly she lifts it to her lips and light kisses each finger before speaking again. "I think it is time we go back to your room."

She never takes her eyes off me as she takes money from her wallet and places it on the table. "Shall we go?" she asks as she stands up and offers me her hand.

Together we walk hand in hand out of the restaurant and into our future.

I am lost, but this time it is in Jack.

* * * * *

I give her the key card and she expertly slides it and opens the door. Taking the DO NOT DISTURB card off the inside handle she places it outside then closes the door and securely locks everything.

I am quivering inside in anticipation of the night to come. She is so beautiful. I can't believe that she actually has any interest in me much less is about to make love with me.

Jack takes me in her arms and gently kisses my eyes and cheeks before softly placing her lips on mine. The sensations coursing through my body tells me this is so very right and I respond to her by kissing her deeply. She pulls back a bit and smiles at me, "are you sure?" she asks, her voice deep and sensual.

"Yes."

Her arms release me and she begins to unbutton my shirt. With each button undone, her lips kiss the exposed skin exploring as she makes her way to my waist. Rising up, she places her palms on my shoulders and runs them down my arms until the shirt cascades to the floor. She unfastens my bra and lets that fall landing on my shirt.

Once again, she smiles. "You are so beautiful." Her fingertips are like feathers gliding across my body. I can feel goose bumps and know they are not from the coolness of the room, but from Jack's touch. Her hands, making their way to my waist, begin to unfasten my slacks and pull the zipper down.

In no time, I find myself standing in front of this incredible woman naked wanting more. Tentatively, I begin to remove her clothes while Jack's fingers linger over my breasts pulling and tugging at hard nipples. Finally, she too is exposed and I move into

her so our bodies are touching. Explosions fill my body as I feel myself melt into her.

We are lying in bed face to face and Jack's thumb wipes a tear from my cheek before her lips kiss the trail left behind. "Why are you crying?"

I cannot answer her for I am so overcome with emotion that words are lost. The only response I have is to kiss her deeply before beginning to investigate her body. She responds by mirroring my every move. Lips kiss the tender skin of breasts and tongues lavish praise on taut nipples.

I need to kiss every part of her. With each contact, my mind and body remember more and more until I am sure, I have made love with Jack before! I find my way back to her lips and kiss her reverently.

"Do you feel it too, Jack?"

"Yes," she whispers, "I have loved you for all time."

Our lips meet again, this time not so much in passion as in welcoming each other home. Jack is home to me; she is where I belong where I am no longer lost. I realize how alone I have felt for all my life waiting for this moment...waiting for Jack to return to me.

"I love you."

We lay wrapped in each other's arms blissful in our love. Our love making was not the hard, heart pounding got to get off type, but slow, sensual and a journey of rediscovery. We became one blending the past into the present igniting the passion of long ago. Yes, we have found our other halves and our lovemaking reflect the joy only that discovery can bring.

I feel Jack begin to stir and make a move to leave me. "Please, don't go. Stay with me."

She lowers her body and our skin merges again. "I will always stay with you," she whispers in my ear before she kisses my lips once more.

The sounds of running water wake me from a blissful sleep. Opening my eyes, I stare at the white swirled ceiling of a room in the Hotel Monaco in Washington D.C. My body is naked and I am sure I still feel kisses lingering everywhere as the taste and smell of Jack fills my senses. Never in my wildest imaginations could I believe anything or anyone could move me to such a passionate encounter. Yet, here I am pulling the sheet back, letting my bare feet touch the richly carpeted floor, walking towards the bathroom and opening the door. I can't help myself. I want, no need, to feel that luscious body next to mine again.

I stop in the doorway shaking my head trying to comprehend what I see. The shower is empty and the towels are still neatly folded exactly where the housekeeper left them. Where is Jack? Panicked, I turn back to the room and look at the bed. Only half has been slept in! Where's Jack? Then I remember...then I know. Sinking to my knees, I begin to sob uncontrollably the pain is too real. She is gone, she was never here and I am alone and lost.

* * * * *

Somehow, I've packed my bags and made it to BWI. I know Jack said she would pick me up and bring me here, but it would be too much to see her again. I remember how we came back to the room last night and she hugged me and kissed my cheek. I asked her to come inside and she said 'no'. I don't understand how what seemed so real wasn't. Anyway, I am here now and soon the plane will be boarding and I will be on my way home. Back to reality and my life, the one I was meant to lead. When I think of the fool I made of myself, I am sure Jack must be laughing her head off. How could I be so stupid? Yet, I remember every word she said, every look she gave and every touch on my body. All of that pulled me in and I know she felt it too... our connection, our past and our love. Now I have let her go and I am sure there will be many days of self loathing and nights of endless tears that she will never hear.

Arriving home, I am finding it difficult to smile. I draw into myself feigning illness and go to bed. Every time I open or close my eyes Jack is there filling my

mind with both sadness and joy. I know Mike is worried about me, but how can I tell him what has happened or what I feel? He has been so good to me over the years, yet if I was not with him, I know I would be with Jack.

It is Monday and I drag myself into work earlier than usual. I welcome the quiet and the chance to get away from Mike and the hurt and concern of his eyes. I sit down at my desk and go through all the messages neatly stacked there. I mindlessly look at them not really paying attention until one grabs my attention... Jacqueline Reinhart would like you to call her as soon as you arrive back. I check the time and see it was early Friday, "probably wants my report," I say to the piece of pink paper. Continuing on I find four more messages from Jack the last one saying... Jacqueline Reinhart called again and really needs you to speak with her as soon as possible. "Fat chance of that! I've learned my lesson and will never let her hurt me again!" I crumble up all her messages and throw them exactly where they belong, in the trash!

I sigh deeply when I look at the time and realize that soon everyone would be coming to work. It will be show time then and I am not certain I can pull it off without crying. Over the years, I have managed to put a wall around my emotions and until Jack came into my life was very adept at hiding my feelings. Now, I'm not sure I will ever be able to do that again.

Next I start to go through my mail. I see a special delivery letter with the name j.reinhart as the sender. It was mailed on Friday, *she must have sent it by courier*, and instantly I begin to open it to see what she has to say, but stop myself. Holding the envelope, I want desperately to tear it into tiny pieces yet, I long to know what she has to say. Opening it I see the clear bold writing I know is Jack's...

My Dearest Carol,

What do I say to you? Your leaving without waiting devastated me. I know I sent you mixed signals all week and that you felt

rejected by me when you reacted to what you thought those signals meant. It wasn't you, Carol, it was my fear of the deep love I feel for you. I told you I had found what I had been searching for all my life and that is the truth. I know you felt the sincerity behind those words I could see it in your eyes. I also saw the love there and frankly, that scares me.

Each time I found myself drawn to you and wanting to show you how much I love you, I turned away. I am not sure I can explain why, but I want to try. If we made love, I don't think I would be able to let you go back to your life and not resent everything and everyone. I think had I asked you would have stayed; your life is not with me and to take you away from what you know and love would have been wrong. Had you remained with me, we would have been blissfully happy, of that I am sure. But, I would wait in fear for the day that you would resent me for taking you away from your family. And, I know that day would come.

Do you recall one of our discussions and my telling you how much I detest liars? Do you know why? Of course you don't...I was in a relationship for close to sixteen years...I would still be there except I came home one day and found someone else in my bed. When I think back on all the lies and far fetched stories I convinced myself were true I cringe at my stupidity. Can you understand if we made love we would have been no better than that which I deplore? I can't and won't do that to you, Carol, I love you too much to put you through that kind of heartache.

This is not our lifetime - at least not right now. I am sorry that I hurt you so badly and was unable to explain my actions to you. But, I feel it was for the best for us both.

You are in my heart now and always. I love you...always have and always will. I am always here for you.

*Yours forever,
Jack*

My heart is breaking as I realize the truth of her words...she let me go because she loves me. I know if she had asked, I would have left everything I know and love behind, to spend the rest of my life with her. She is my heart and soul. I lost her in another lifetime and have been searching for her ever since. How ironic that now that we have found each other again, we must let go. Her words are poignant and the truth behind them is too real to ignore.

In every lifetime, souls search for their mate longing to be complete once again. Sometimes they pass each other with instant recognition while other times only a nanosecond lies between chance meetings that never happen. Souls destined to meet must seize the moment or it will pass them by leaving them searching in vain.

I must be satisfied knowing where Jack is and that the loneliness my soul felt is gone. I have no right to expect anything from her for all I can give her is my heart and she deserves so much more.

Picking up the phone, I dial her number.

"Hello."

I hear her voice and I am once again lost in that which is Jack. Yet, my search is over; I have found my other half and I am complete.

The End

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