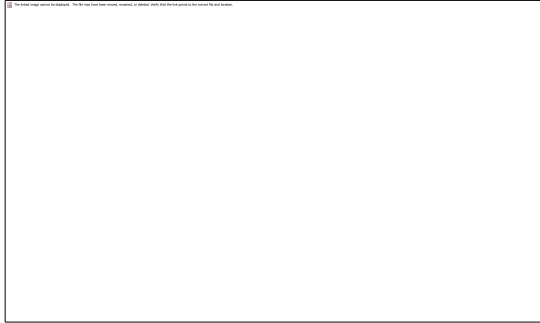


# ~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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**Disclaimers:** Here we go again. They might look familiar, but then again, that could just be your imagination. We've got girls here...girls in love...girls who know how to have a good time. Adults only, please; and if you live in one of those places where your politicians say stupid things about the evil homosexual lifestyle, you'd best not be taking this to your government job.

Many thanks to my beta reader, Tami. I recently learned that she reads my stuff on her PDA while she drives. Btw, the first four lines were her idea. Thanks also to my Sweetcakes, who really sharpened her pencil this time and made this story a lot better.

Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

## Part 1

### Chapter 1

*Flick. Flick.*

*Plop!*

*Flick.*

*Plop!*

"Great! Now I'm going to smell like onions all night," the blonde woman grouched as she picked the unwanted condiment from her sandwich. "Why did you even bother asking what I wanted if you weren't going to listen?"

"I got distracted," the man whined, taking an oversized bite from his roast beef sandwich. He had offered to run to the gourmet deli to pick up their dinner, both of them having grown weary of the menu from the restaurant downstairs.

"Yeah, I bet I know by what...or rather by whom. What's her name?" she teased amiably.

"Juliana," he sighed.

"I bet Juliana smells like onions."

"Careful," the red-haired man cautioned, "that's my future wife you're talking about."

"Right! What's her last name?"

Rusty Wilburn looked away sheepishly. "Don't know yet," he admitted. "But it doesn't matter, because you'll be calling her Mrs. Wilburn."

Paula McKenzie chuckled at her boss. In the three years they'd been paired up on the night shift, the two had gotten to know each other pretty well, and she knew that Rusty could fall in love at the drop of a hat. Too bad he hadn't fallen for someone who worked at a Thai restaurant. Chicken salad on rye was getting old, especially with onions.

From 3:30 p.m. to midnight, Paula and Rusty were the designated adults at the Weller Regent Hotel in Orlando. Situated only a block from the downtown convention center, the four-star hotel catered to upscale business travelers who wanted something quieter, something with a more personal touch.

At the Weller Regent, or the WR as it was called by the staff, there was no player piano in the entryway hammering out a mindless loop until the wee hours of the morning; no open cocktail bar in the lobby; nor a towering fountain or waterfall whose roar forced people standing next to one another to shout. Instead, the hotel possessed a calmer, more distinguished ambience that was perfect for those who needed a respite on the road.

Everything about the WR was plush, almost decadent. The feathered pillow-top mattresses were the finest anywhere; the towels and robes were soft and luxurious. The guest rooms were spacious, tastefully adorned with deep rich colors on cherry framed furniture. Elegant Tiffany style lamps took the place of the more generic light fixtures for a homier feel.

The WR was more expensive than most of the other downtown options, but worth it in the eyes of a weary upscale business traveler. Management kept a database of preferences from previous stays and tried to anticipate customer needs. The level of service from the well-trained staff was second to none.

While earning her hospitality degree nine years ago at the University of Florida, Paula had landed a coveted summer internship at this, Weller's oldest hotel. Immediately upon graduating, she had come on board as a night desk clerk, moving through all the departments - catering, business services, meetings, training - to the position she now held: Shift Manager. Two more rungs remained before she could move into the coveted role of hotel operations - daytime management - but it was likely she would have to relocate to move up in the chain, since Rusty, the Senior Shift Manager, had been here four years longer than she, and was next in line here in Orlando. That was her career goal, though: hotel operations and one day, her own hotel.

"Damn it!" Rusty sat up and reached for his napkin, a futile gesture against the mustard stain on his dark blue shirt.

"You did that on purpose!" Paula accused.

"I did not!"

By mutual consent, tonight was Rusty's night to deal with emergencies and customer complaints while Paula did paperwork in the second floor administrative offices. But with his shirt prominently sporting a bright yellow stain, she would have to be the one to venture out if the need arose.

Sunday nights were moderately busy, the weekend convention goes giving way to those road warriors headed for another week of business meetings. The housekeeping staff had turned over virtually every room in the last 12 hours, and Paula had spent the entire afternoon conducting inspections and completing employee evaluations. Thanks to Rusty's prolonged trip to the deli - during which she had to help out at the front desk - she was way behind with her weekly reports.

Rusty had his own pile of paperwork to resolve. Maintenance logs, inventory sheets, and vendor invoices filled his desk. If they were lucky, the staff on hand would find a way to deal with problems so both of the managers could catch up.

"Hey, look who's back."

Paula glanced at the security monitor positioned between their desks. Every five seconds, the image rotated automatically to a different camera, from the main entrance, to the front desk, to the elevator lobby on the main floor, and to the pool area. Rusty grabbed the remote and froze the angle immediately upon recognizing the woman they had watched twice before as she checked into the WR on Sunday night.

"Too bad you're practically married," Paula chided. "What would Juliana No Last Name think of you ogling someone else?" For her own part, the blonde set her work aside for the moment to watch the tall beauty exit the taxi and direct the bellman to her bags. Indeed, Paula too had noticed this guest on her first visit a month ago. Who wouldn't?

"I'm looking for someone for you now," he kidded.

Paula laughed. "While I happen to applaud your tastes in this case, I hereby relieve you of your mission. This tape will self-destruct...."

"Wonder what her story is," Rusty mused. When they had a rare moment of down time, the two would entertain one another with their made-up background stories of the anonymous guests.

"I don't know. I guess she's just your typical business traveler."

"No, I mean the limp."

The pair studied the dark-haired woman as she paid the cabbie, gathered her purse and briefcase, and hobbled toward one of the small glass entryways that framed the hotel's massive revolving door. Both managers were inwardly pleased to see the bellman respond quickly to hold the door open as she disappeared from the camera's view.

"She doesn't act like it bothers her that much," Paula observed casually. She wasn't interested in making this woman a subject of their game...that is, at least not aloud. But she had wondered silently about this beautiful enigma, going so far on her last visit as to pull her reservation record.

Her name was K. Wynne Connelly, and she was from Baltimore. She had the standard corporate rate, billed to Eldon-Markoff, a travel and tour company headquartered a block and a half from their hotel.

Rusty advanced the controls to watch the action at the front desk. Jolene Hardy and Matthew Stivich worked efficiently to check in the short line of guests, the former in the final week of her probationary period.

"Jolene's done a great job, hasn't she?" Paula asked, changing the subject as she searched the video for sight of the woman in line.

"Yeah, she caught on quick. You've really brought her along well."

Paula had mentored the new hire since her first day as a college intern. Once Jolene cleared probation, she'd be given more authority to appease guests. As it was, she still needed supervision, requiring a manager's okay to waive a charge or to make special accommodations.

"Looks like she needs a hand with that one," Rusty offered, knowing full well that Paula would have to go downstairs to take care of the obviously irate gentleman at the counter. Without the sound on the video, they relied on facial expressions, and this man was about to blow his top.

The blonde woman groaned. "I guess I should wash my hands first, since your future wife put onions all over my sandwich."

Paula stopped quickly in the ladies room to wash up and check her appearance. Today's suit - taupe linen with a navy silk top - was her favorite combination from among the four WR uniforms. In her closet hung its complement, a navy suit with a cream-colored silk blouse, and several coral tops that were worn on certain days with either suit. From time to time, the hotel updated its worker fashions, but conservative attire was the rule. After nine years of being told what to wear to work, she'd grown accustomed to it, and was grateful that the corporate directors at least had a sense of style.

From the ladies room, she proceeded down the back stairs to emerge behind Jolene at the check-in counter. A quick glance told her that Matthew had things under control on his end of the counter, but the man in front of her newest clerk was growing louder by the second.

"How can I help here, Jolene?"

"I'll tell you how you can help," the red-faced man stormed. "You can get me the king-sized bed I specifically reserved!"

Paula looked over the shoulder of her harried clerk. "Mr. Thomason, is it?"

"That's right." He was infinitely pleased to be getting special treatment from the person in charge. What he didn't actually realize was that the Weller Regent judiciously avoided "assistant manager" labels, hoping to provide assurance that their needs warranted attention from the hotel's top personnel.

"Our reservationist probably didn't make it clear at the time, but we aren't able to guarantee all room types for guests traveling alone. But let me see what I can do." In fact, it was standard practice for the reservationists to read a disclaimer that many guests simply ignored. But arguing with Mr. Thomason wasn't going to solve the problem. The manager searched a moment, then used her code to manually override the system. "I can upgrade you to the Concierge floor and waive the extra fee for this stay. In the future, if you're traveling alone, you can reserve a specific room type by booking directly onto the Concierge level," she advised with quiet authority.

Paula stepped back and allowed Jolene to complete the transaction. Spotting a familiar face next in line, she immediately shifted to an open terminal. "I can help you here."

The tall woman stepped forward and proffered her credit card. "I'm Wynne Connelly."

*Oh, I know who you are.* "Yes, Ms. Connelly, I have your reservation right here, a single room, non-smoking, three nights."

"That's correct." Smiling slyly, she leaned across the counter and lowered her voice. "So if I act like an ass, can I get upgraded to the Concierge floor too?"

Paula chuckled and shook her head without looking up. "I tell you what, Ms. Connelly. What if I just do the upgrade anyway and save us both the bother?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I was just being silly. But I appreciate the thought," the brunette said sincerely, a little embarrassed to have evoked such a generous offer. "I promise not to misbehave," she whispered.

Paula laughed, finally looking up to see the smiling blue eyes. "That's okay. We like a challenge," she joked. "I'd be happy to do it, though. I see that you're making a habit of staying with us, and we'd like to reward that."

"Well, thank you. I suppose I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, eh?"

"I wouldn't if I were you," the Shift Manager advised. "It's really a nice deal if you can take

advantage of the extras. You'll have two phone lines and a fax machine, and high-speed Internet access. Breakfast is served in the private lounge from six a.m. until 10; cocktails and hors d'oeuvres are available after five; and if you want to stop by before turning in tonight, they'll have coffee and dessert until midnight."

"I'll be sure to check that out." Wynne scribbled her name on the signature card and initialed the rate and departure date.

"Did you have a nice trip into Orlando this evening?" Paula asked that question of all her guests at check-in - to be polite, of course, but also to kill time while the computer processed her commands. Tonight, though, she was also enjoying the chance to make conversation.

"It was delightfully uneventful, like all flights should be," the brunette replied. "And it was wonderful to arrive someplace where it was warm. It was snowing in Baltimore when I left."

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying our weather, at least for tonight." Paula turned to indicate the placard behind her that displayed weather icons for the next three days. "It's supposed to rain all day tomorrow and the next day."

"That figures. I didn't bring an umbrella."

"I have one in my office. If you like, I'll send it up with a bellman later. You can just leave it at the front desk when you check out."

"Boy, you really are accommodating tonight, aren't you?" *How about a backrub?*

"Just that good old Weller Regent service, second to none." *Listen to me flirt with this woman!*

"Well, I couldn't take your umbrella. You might need it yourself. Besides, my coat has a hood."

"No, I won't need it. I lend it out all the time," Paula insisted. In fact, she had lent it only once, to a pretty flight attendant who chatted with her sweetly at check-in...much like Wynne Connelly was doing.

"Well, in that case, I accept."

"So do you travel a lot with your work?"

"A fair bit. Our headquarters is here, and it looks like I'll be coming back and forth a lot for the next few months." *While I still have a job.*

"Well, I'm glad that you've chosen to stay with us. We'll do our best to make your stay here at Weller Regent comfortable. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to call, Ms. Connelly." Though it sounded official and contrived, the manager made it a point to look directly into the tall woman's eyes to convey the offer as sincere.

Wynne noticed the look, even though she recognized the standard line for what it was. "Shall I ask for you when I call?" she teased. *Turn-down service maybe?*

"If you like," Paula smiled, slipping a business card from her pocket. Departing from her usual business tone, she continued, "Here's my direct extension. I'll be here tonight and tomorrow night as well."

Wynne pocketed the card and smiled back at the manager. If she didn't know better, she'd swear the petite blonde was flirting with her. *Okay by me.* "I'm sure everything will be fine."

The computer spit out the key card. There was really no more reason to keep the woman at the desk. Paula pushed the envelope across the counter. "This is your room number." She circled 2308 in red. For security reasons, they never repeated the room number aloud. "You'll need your key in the elevator; just insert it and wait for the green light before pressing your floor. Would you like some help with your bags?"

"No, I can manage. Thank you for everything." Wynne shouldered her briefcase and smiled gratefully at the blonde manager. *Paula McKenzie*, the nametag read. *Pretty lady.*

"You're very welcome." *Very.* Paula congratulated herself on her timing, quietly applauding whatever forces had come together to cause Mr. Thomason to behave like a jerk and Wynne Connelly to arrive a moment later. It was nice to have finally gotten the chance to meet the beautiful woman, and a special bonus to have the authority to dole out such a treat.

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Wynne walked toward the elevator, rolling her suitcase behind her. *Yes indeed, I think she was flirting. I know I was.*

Moments later, she exited the elevator directly across from the private lounge. Clusters of love seats and wing back chairs held couples and small groups, all conversing softly in the dim light as they sampled the dessert offerings. It was a pleasant atmosphere and one she would try to take advantage of; provided of course that she didn't get hit on. That was the worst part about traveling alone, and the main reason that she usually just ordered room service.

Wynne studied the key for a moment and inserted it into the slot. By all appearances, the room was like those she had stayed in before, except for the fax machine and king-sized bed. The latter was certainly a welcome change, given her five foot-ten inch frame.

Methodically, she emptied her suitcase and hung up her three crisp suits, only one of which she'd ever worn. As marketing director at Gone Tomorrow Tours, Eldon-Markoff's newest subsidiary in Baltimore, Wynne usually wore skirts and sweaters or sometimes pantsuits to work. But the

corporate culture was more formal in Orlando, so she'd dipped into her savings to purchase eight new suits to get her through this strategic planning project.

Most likely, she'd be keeping this travel schedule through the end of April, which was not a bad time to be leaving Baltimore for sunny Florida. After that, who knows? She might have planned herself right out of a job. At least she'd have nice new clothes to wear to job interviews.

That's what this project was all about: streamlining the marketing and sales initiatives for Eldon-Markoff. That meant crafting a plan to link the company's worldwide travel agencies and its tours. Wynne was asked to work on the plan, along with sales director Doug Messner from the Dallas travel agency office. Heading up the task force was Cheryl Williams, Eldon-Markoff's vice-president of sales and marketing. Cheryl was dynamo, a skilled leader whom Wynne admired for her ability to get things done.

But it was clear after only two trips - six days total - that sales and marketing would operate more efficiently if it were centralized. Now it was up to these three to draft a plan to make it happen. If they worked well, she'd probably get a good severance package.

A sharp knock on the door signaled the arrival of the bellman with the borrowed umbrella.

"Thank you," the tall woman said, passing the young man a couple of bills.

"You're welcome, Ms. Connelly. And Ms. McKenzie asked me to remind you about the dessert." The young man was glad to see the smile that his message had elicited.

"Please tell her thanks, and that I will go see about dessert right now."

Checking to make certain she had her key, Wynne followed the bellman back to the elevator, at once eyeing the dessert table in the center of the lounge.

"May I bring you something to drink?" a tuxedoed woman asked.

Wynne thought about it and passed, deciding she'd just grab one of the sweet offerings and return to her room. So many different treats...but she should only have one. So she took the lime tart with the strawberry on top. And the truffle.

Back in her room, the tall woman dropped tiredly into the wingback chair. It was almost 10 and she had a full day tomorrow. Her leg throbbed from the demands of her trip. Fishing in her purse, she drew out a bottle of ibuprofen. Since the accident two years ago, she carried it everywhere she went, always knowing that the leg would start to ache from deep within. A hot bath would soothe the pain and help her sleep.

Flicking on the light in the marble bathroom, Wynne silently blessed Paula McKenzie for the upgrade: her tub was equipped with massaging air jets.



## Chapter 2

Monday was shaping up like just another night at the Weller Regent.

Paula walked the hallways from end to end at least once a day, on all 23 floors. Mostly, she checked to ensure that fixtures were in working order, doors were not left ajar, and that room service trays were picked up in a timely manner, but she also kept an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. So far, she'd logged two burned out lights and one that flickered off and on. On the 23rd floor, the Concierge floor, she discovered a wallet stuffed behind a plant, likely hidden by a pickpocket who had pilfered the contents.

"Security, please," she directed softly into the walkie-talkie.

"Security here," a male voice crackled.

"I need a security officer in the elevator lobby of the 23rd floor, please." Paula was eager to get this cleared up quickly, as the sight of a security guard in the Concierge lobby might unnerve some of the guests.

"On the way. Roger out."

Three minutes later, the uniformed guard arrived and began to document the evidence in the event criminal charges might be filed. They usually weren't, but management always wanted fingerprints when possible to rule out employees. It was doubtful though that an employee would have hidden the wallet in plain view of the camera in the ceiling. Too bad about the fool that ignored the warning signs that the public areas of the premises were under surveillance.

Together, she and the guard carefully opened the wallet to confirm its contents, or rather, lack of contents. But there was a driver's license, and she immediately called downstairs to get the room number of its owner, William C. Jeffries.

"Do we have tape?" she asked the guard.

"We should. I'll check it when I go back down."

"Call me when you find something."

Moments later, Paula's knock was answered by a middle-aged man, apparently fresh from a shower in his robe and with dripping hair. The manager explained the purpose of her visit, then

listened calmly as Jeffries ranted about the hotel's lack of security, demanding reimbursement and threatening to sue for damages if the thief ran up charges on his credit cards. When she assured him that the hotel had videotape that would likely show who had hidden his wallet, the irate man suddenly turned docile.

"You know, I'm probably just making a big deal out of nothing. I can cancel all the cards with just a phone call, and as long as I have my driver's license, the only real thing I lost was some cash. I guess that's the price for being careless with my wallet, huh?"

When she exited the man's room, Paula went immediately to the house phone. Some information was not suited for broadcast on a broader frequency.

"Hello, Tim? I think we've got another hooker working the building. If you find something on the tape, let's get the OPD in and see if we can get an ID."

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Wynne glanced at the check-in counter on her way to the elevators, hoping to catch sight of a friendly face. It had been a long day - most Mondays were when Sunday was spent traveling - and she was looking forward to kicking back with a book, and to making a meal out of the hors d'oeuvres in the lounge. No such luck on the friendly face front. Paula McKenzie was nowhere to be found.

The happy hour fare in the lounge had turned out to be a godsend. Room service was nice, but then her room would smell like dinner all night. Going out was even less attractive, especially alone; though she had politely refused several dinner invitations from Doug. Her Dallas counterpart was young and single, and enjoyed the fun he could have on an expense account. For that reason, he had opted to stay at the Hyatt, Eldon-Markoff's other approved hotel, calling the Weller Regent a little too uptight for his tastes. Coming from a sales background, Doug liked meeting new people and striking up conversations, thus he appreciated the atmosphere of the Hyatt's sprawling cocktail lounge on the main floor and its lively piano bar. The quiet atmosphere of the concierge lounge was more to Wynne's liking.

The tall brunette settled into a wingback chair in the corner by the window, her small plate loaded with grilled fish strips with lemon and capers, brie and crackers, and fruit. It wouldn't do to eat like this often, but it was hard to avoid calories while traveling and still get enough to satisfy her hunger. Besides, if she kept up her workout on the stationary bike - which she had to do anyway to keep her left leg limber - she could probably stave off the extra pounds.

"Do you mind if I join you?" A smartly dressed businessman held a cocktail in one hand and a plate of chicken wings in the other.

"Not at all," Wynne answered graciously. "But I have to warn you that I'm at a very exciting part of my book, so I doubt I'll be very good company." *I don't plan on entertaining you, mister.*

Dejected, Bill Jeffries turned to look for another seat.

"Mr. Jeffries, may I see you a moment please?" As she entered the lounge, Paula noticed the woman in the corner and smiled. "Good evening, Ms. Connelly."

"And to you, Ms. McKenzie." Wynne was quite pleased to see the familiar face, even though it was clear that the night shift manager was in the lounge in her official capacity. It was probably just wishful thinking that the woman had been flirting the night before, but it was nice to imagine it just the same. Still, it would be nice to have a friend here, especially since it looked like she'd be back at least a half dozen times or more.

After a brief conversation in the hallway, both the blonde woman and the man who had sought her company returned to the lounge. To Wynne's delight, Paula McKenzie was headed her way, and she quickly closed her book.

"What are you reading?"

The brunette held up the front cover. "It's Pamela Crenshaw's latest. I picked it up at the airport yesterday afternoon." Crenshaw had written a series of spy novels featuring a military heroine, Major Dana Grant. Each new release vaulted to the top of the bestseller list, both in hard cover and in paperback.

"Oh, I haven't seen that one. But I've read the others. Crenshaw really tells a great story."

"Yeah, but I have to admit, I think she's sort of gone over the top with the Major. It's kind of hard to believe a person can be perfect at everything."

"I'm not sure what you mean. Aren't all of your friends black belt gourmet cooks who can perform heart surgery in the dark while docking the Queen Mary?"

That sent the tall woman into a fit of laughter that delighted Paula.

"Now that you mention it, a lot of my friends are like that," Wynne agreed jovially.

"So is everything to your liking? Your room, I mean."

"Yes, it's very nice. And the lounge is very nice. Thank you so much for the upgrade. I think I'll lean on the accountant at Eldon-Markoff to let me book up here on my next trip."

"I'm glad you're comfortable. I suppose it's hard to be away from home and your family so much, so I hope we can make it a little easier." Paula was fishing, but Wynne didn't recognize the opening to take the bait.

"You do make it easier, and I appreciate it." She was having trouble deciding if Paula was being friendly and personable, or just performing her professional duties. Best to play it safe.

Paula would have liked nothing better than to order a drink of her own and pull up a chair. Not that she could do something like that at work anyway, but it also would have presumptuous as hell, she thought. Wynne Connelly was just being nice; she was probably one of those people who made everyone feel special just by talking to them.

"I suppose I should get back to work. If I don't see you again tonight, have a safe trip home."

"Thank you. Oh, and thanks for the umbrella. I'll be sure to leave it at the desk."

"You're welcome." Paula resisted the urge to pat the woman's knee.

Wynne watched the manager leave, first stopping by the host's desk to say hello to the staff and ask how things were going. *She's good at her job.* Wynne wondered how old the woman was. With her long blonde hair and soft features, she looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties; but her poise and authority was that of someone older, more experienced in the work world. Wynne admired the same qualities in her boss Cheryl Williams, a woman in her late forties. She found those traits - and Paula McKenzie - to be very attractive.

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"Have you tried the plunger, like I showed you?" Wynne was growing frustrated at the futility of it all. "Then you should do that first. If it doesn't work, don't use that toilet anymore, and call a plumber first thing in the morning."

The digital clock read 11:45.

"Mom, I can't do a thing for you tonight. I'm in Orlando," she explained. "Yes, my cell phone works here, same as always." *Obviously.* "I know you didn't know, but this is my week to travel. I won't get home until Wednesday night."

Wynne threw the covers back and stretched out for the water bottle on the desk. "No, I have to work on Thursday. I can come by Thursday night, but you should call a plumber tomorrow if the plunger doesn't work." With her foot, she dragged her purse closer and retrieved the ibuprofen.

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe Sophie put something in it," a reference to her 2-year-old niece. "Who knows?" Two tablets...make it three. "Probably a hundred bucks or so, maybe more if they have to stay a while. But what else are you going to do?" Wynne was exasperated. "You can't just leave a toilet overflowing in the house. It'll ruin the floor and the ceiling underneath it. Keep it mopped up and call a plumber first thing, okay?"

Settling back into bed, she cradled the phone underneath her chin. "Mom, I have to get back to sleep. I have a long day tomorrow," she pleaded. "I know this was an emergency. Just do what I said. It will be fine.... Yes, I love you too. I'll come by Thursday night. Goodnight, Mom."

Wynne sighed deeply as she returned the phone to its cradle for charging. One would think that Katharine Connelly - Kitty to her friends - was the most helpless person on earth. When Wynne's father died six years ago, her mother had come completely unglued. Within a year, her house was in disrepair, her finances a mess; the woman could barely decide what to wear each day.

Wynne painstakingly balanced the household checkbook, arranged for a housekeeper to come by twice a week, and contracted with a handyman to make the necessary repairs. On top of that, she started calling her mother two or three times during the day, just to keep her company and make sure everything was okay.

Growing up, neither Wynne nor her younger sister Janelle had realized the degree to which their mother had shaped her entire existence around their family. When both daughters left home, her devotion to her husband had kept Kitty grounded; without him, she was aimless.

Wynne had hoped for something of a reprieve last year when Janelle had moved back to Baltimore, unmarried but with a daughter of her own, Sophie. But Janelle had her hands full with nursing school, not the mention to the demands of a 2-year-old.

There was certainly one thing she didn't mind about the travel to Orlando: it was, for the most part, a respite from the day to day worries of managing her mom's life. It wasn't that Wynne didn't want to help her mother through this difficult time, but after six years, Kitty Connelly hadn't made a lot of progress toward living on her own. Part of the problem was that 90-year-old Tudor house.

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Paula pulled the pin on the leg extensor and reset it at 35 pounds. It was a pain following the Incredible Hulk around the weight room, but she got a small measure of satisfaction knowing that he would follow her on his next circuit and would also have to reset the pins.

"How's work been, Val?" Val Harbison was Paula's best friend, and the manager of Flanagan's, a downtown sports bar. The two met five years ago at an accounting workshop organized by Orlando's expansive travel industry. Right off the bat, they liked one another. It was easy to commiserate about the lack of a social life, as both women were locked into working evenings and weekends. That ruled out clubs and parties, and left them mostly with meeting people through work. On weekdays, the two women met to work out in the fitness room at Paula's condominium complex. Usually, they had the place to themselves; this wasn't the Hulk's normal

workout time.

"We've gotten busier these last few weeks, so I guess that means the season's in full swing."

"Yeah, things have picked up for us too. Have you been out with Kevin?"

"Not since we did The Mouse." The Mouse was what many of the locals called Disneyworld. "I don't think that's going to work out. I mean, we can only see each other in the daytime, and I just don't want to spend all my dates at the attractions, then rushing to get to work on time."

"I know what you mean. Knowing you have to go to work just takes the fun out of whatever you're doing. At least I have Saturdays off." On the weekends, Paula often visited her family in Cocoa Beach, sometimes staying over until Sunday to go to church with her mom and dad.

"I'd kill for Saturdays off. But the weekends are our busiest days."

"Saturdays aren't that bad at the hotel, at least at night. Most of the convention traffic gets in on Friday. I think that's why Rusty takes off then and gives me Saturdays off. A lot of these convention goers only travel once a year, and they don't have a clue about how to survive away from home."

"What do they do?"

"What *don't* they do?" Paula groaned. "They complain about the price of everything, and they never miss a chance to tell you how they do things up north. They're like 18-year-olds when they first go away to college. They want to stay up all night and party in the halls. They smoke wherever they please. They don't keep up with their belongings. They can't find anything, even with a map." Paula slowly counted her reps.

"That would drive me crazy. At least the folks that come in Flanagan's seem to know the drill: Find a seat in front of the game you want to watch, drink your beer, and tip your waitress. Nothing to it."

Paula recounted the story of the man whose wallet was stolen last night by his hooker, and how he'd threatened to sue the hotel until he learned that they had her on videotape. When she'd told him that the Orlando Police Department could probably identify the woman, he'd backed off completely, refusing to press charges, effectively ending the hotel's liability.

"Isn't it funny how self-righteous some people can be," Val proclaimed. "Imagine what he'd have done if you'd found it after he left and called him at home!"

"Yeah, or what if we'd called his office?"

"Really," Val huffed. "So have you had any good looking flight attendants lately?"

"No flight attendants, but there is a gorgeous woman staying there who works at Eldon-Markoff.

She came in on Sunday night from Baltimore. She's beautiful," Paula said dreamily, grabbing the pull-down bar for her lat reps. "And she has a limp. I'd love to know that story."

"So does she bat for your team?"

"I doubt it. But she's...I don't know, friendlier than most people."

"To everyone or just to you?"

"That I couldn't tell you. But I swear when she checked in the other night, it was almost like she was flirting. I told her to call if she needed anything, and she said 'Should I ask for you?' Doesn't that strike you as flirty?"

"Well I hope you told her yes!"

"I did. And I gave her my card. And I lent her my umbrella. And I upgraded her to the Concierge floor."

"Good lord, woman! I'm surprised she didn't go down on you in the lobby!" Val whispered the last part so Hulk wouldn't hear it.

"Oh, don't say things like that. My heart can't take it!" Paula laughed. "I talked with her for a few minutes last night in the lounge. She's really nice, and she's going to be coming back and forth for the next few months. Maybe we'll get to know each other."

"Does she have a name?"

"She has a lovely name. It just rolls off your lips. Wynne Connelly."

### **Chapter 3**

The woman with the lovely name exited the taxi and reveled in the warm humid air, glad to again be rid of the Baltimore ice and snow. It was no mere coincidence that her leg felt better after being in Orlando for a day or two, and she looked forward to that.

This time, Wynne's arrival went unnoticed by management, both of whom were on the 16th floor seeing to a guest who had fallen ill after dinner. The hotel's physician on call had come to the room and diagnosed acute food poisoning. Predictably, Paula was concerned about the woman's

well-being, while Rusty was rejoicing at the fact that the woman hadn't dined in the hotel.

"May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Wynne Connelly," the tall woman answered, presenting her credit card.

"I have your reservation, Ms. Connelly. You've booked a single non-smoking room on our Concierge floor for three nights. Is that right?"

"Yes." Without the charges for high speed Internet access and two meals a day from room service, the upgrade was a virtual wash. Besides, Wynne didn't have the bar bill of her Dallas counterpart, so she refused to feel guilty about indulging in a little luxury at the company's expense. The tub was worth it even if she had to pay the extra from her own pocket.

Jolene handed over the room key and walked her through the procedures for reaching the Concierge floor. Wynne politely interrupted the explanation with the assurance that she was already familiar with the routine and the use of the key in the elevator.

"Would you like some help with your bags?"

"No thank you. I can manage." Wynne folded her unneeded overcoat over her arm. Turning toward the elevator, she was surprised to see Paula McKenzie rush past her toward the front door, walkie-talkie in hand.

"It's pulling in right now," the commanding blonde messaged.

The flashing red lights drew Wynne's attention to the entrance, where an ambulance had come to a stop directly in front of the door. Surprised by the sudden commotion, she watched the blonde woman calmly but hurriedly direct the attendants to a waiting elevator. Paula's "take-charge" manner was impressive; if Wynne ever had another emergency, she'd want someone like Paula in charge. Of course, she hoped to never again have an emergency like the last one.

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Paula studied the *Orlando Sentinel's* weather report: sunny and calm, with temperatures climbing to the low seventies; tonight, clear and cool, with a low of 54 - a perfect February day.

It was a red-letter day for central Florida, and for the rest of the country too for that matter. But especially for Paula's family and all the families like hers on Florida's Space Coast. Tonight at 9:06, the shuttle Atlantis would lift off. It would be the first such launch since the Columbia disaster, and all of America was holding its collective breath.



A big orange cat landed with a thud in the middle of the newspaper.

"Hi, Slayer," Paula cooed to her baby. "What's the matter? Are you feeling neglected?"

As if in answer, the cat began to paw at the corner of the paper with his usual persistence. It was hopeless to try to continue to read, so Paula gave up.

"Let's go play," she coaxed.

The gleeful feline followed her to the sliding glass door, rearing to bolt the moment it was opened. Not that freedom lay on the other side, mind you. The door led to a porch, which Paula had enclosed last year with gray-tinted smoke glass to increase the usable square footage of her two-bedroom second-floor condo. The porch ran the length of her living room and guest bedroom, and a single glass-paned door at the end opened to the master bedroom.

As soon as the door cracked open, Slayer dashed out, crashing at once into the glass against first one lizard, then another.

"My fearless hunter," Paula chuckled. One of the bonuses of converting the screen to glass was that the cat could no longer rip into the mesh to capture his startled prey. She had grown decidedly unenamoured of his constant presentation of trophies, especially those he brought to her bed in the night.

"Get your toy!" she coaxed.

Not surprisingly, Slayer ignored her; but then, Slayer was after all a cat. He would get his toy when he was damned good and ready.

The orange cat with the big amber eyes had decided two years ago that Paula could keep him and feed him. In return, he would bring her prizes from the wild and allow his nails to be clipped on occasion. At the time, she was living in an apartment that didn't allow pets. Good thing, too, because Slayer didn't like pets. So when Paula's grandmother died and left her a small inheritance, she used it for a down payment on this condominium to have a place to call her own. Or Slayer's own, as the case seemed to be.

Paula interrupted the play session to take a call in the kitchen.

"Hello...Hi Mom." The blonde woman grew up about an hour away in Cocoa Beach, a small upscale community in the shadow of the launch pads at Cape Canaveral. Her father, Raymond McKenzie, had worked as a NASA public information officer since 1967. Neither she nor her brother Rodney shared their father's aptitude in science and engineering, but they had always been proud of their link to the space program. In her whole life, no days were more difficult than those in which the Challenger and Columbia were lost.

"Yes, I'll be watching...probably up on the roof. It's a pretty good view that high, because there aren't any lights to worry about...I don't know, maybe just by myself, but I promise I'll watch."

As she talked on the phone, she gathered her overcoat and purse and finished her preparations to go to work. Lastly, she fed Slayer, who would eat when he was damned good and ready.

"Listen, I'll call you at T minus 10 minutes to see if you've heard anything." Once the countdown was begun, it was always possible - likely even - that the NASA ground crew would build in a few holds for specific purposes, so the launch didn't always go off at exactly the designated moment. "Gotta run! Give Dad a hug for me, okay?...Yeah, I'll see you all Saturday."

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Wynne opened the cover of the report that detailed the market research on co-branding the travel agency with the tour company. The findings were another nail in the coffin for the old guard at Gone Tomorrow Tours. Low name recognition made it less likely that Eldon-Markoff would preserve that brand; rather, they would incorporate it under their own moniker. At least that's what she would do if the decision were hers.

"How was lunch?" Cheryl Williams dropped her leather folder onto the conference table, ready for the afternoon's work. At 47, her collar-length brown hair was sprinkled with gray, and her small frame caused many to underestimate her toughness.

"It was fine, thank you. I feel a little guilty about enjoying your weather so much when I know that Baltimore got seven inches of new snow last night." Wynne had bought a sandwich at the deli down the street and sat outside on a bench in Eldon-Markoff's courtyard.

"Don't sweat it. Somebody in Baltimore probably deserved it," the vice president quipped. "I saw you outside. You know, you're welcome to have lunch in the executive dining room on the top floor any time you like."

"Thanks, but I think I'll save that one for a rainy day."

Cheryl checked the door and pulled her chair close to Wynne's. "Listen, I wanted to let you know how much I value your input on this plan. You've obviously worked very hard at Gone Tomorrow, and you have a real nose for this stuff."

Both women looked up as Doug returned from lunch and took his seat on the opposite side of the table. Wynne sensed that Cheryl wanted to say more, but Doug's arrival squelched any further personal talk.

"Shall we resume?"

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The staff at the WR knew that this night was special for Paula, and all were willing to do whatever it took to free her up for the next hour or so. She was an understanding boss when one of them had an emergency or needed to leave early. As a supervisor, Paula McKenzie was demanding, but she was always fair and even-tempered. In her nine years at the WR, she had fired only a handful of workers, and no one disputed her judgment on those.

Paula caught the updated coverage on CNN as she grabbed her coat, cell phone, and walkie-talkie. The launch was on, T minus 22 minutes.

Wynne Connelly relaxed with a news magazine in the Concierge lounge, weary from an afternoon of deflecting Doug's objections to everything that threatened his operation in Dallas. The young man was less concerned with what was good for the overall company - not to mention the stockholders, as it was publicly traded - than he was about preserving his own turf, and that was making their work more difficult than it had to be. She didn't know how she was going to deal with one obstacle after another from him for the next 10 weeks.

"Hi."

Wynne was startled to see Paula McKenzie standing right in front of her. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't even seen her approach.

"Hi, Paula...I mean Ms. McKenzie," she stammered. "Sorry, didn't mean to be so familiar."

The blonde woman chuckled. "Paula's fine. In fact, I'd prefer it."

"Well, then, in that case, please call me Wynne."

"Oh, I don't think I can do that. It...wouldn't sound very professional to the other guests. Besides, all my staff would have coronaries on the spot," she grinned.

"I guess they're used to the formality."

"I should hope so. Listen, I stopped by to see if anyone in the lounge would be interested in going up to the roof to watch the shuttle launch. It's a great view, and it's going up in about 15 minutes."

"Wow, I'd love to," Wynne enthused. She'd just been reading about America's return to space.

"Great! You should get your coat and meet me right back here so we can go up together. I'm going to see if any of these other folks want to join us."

Secretly, Wynne hoped they'd all say no, but it was not to be. Only three minutes later, Paula was leading a line of six up two flights of stairs to a locked door on the roof.

When they started up the steps, Paula looked back to see the woman grasp the rail to pull herself up, always leading with her right leg. She had stupidly forgotten about Wynne Connelly's limp, not thinking what a hardship it might be, and was relieved that one of the businessmen had stayed back to help.

When they emerged through the door at the top of the stairs, Paula explained jovially that they were not insured for falling off the roof or through the skylights, but there was room to sit on the various three-foot-high block walls that surrounded the massive air conditioner units. Accordingly, the five other guests broke out into the same clusters they were in when she found them in the lounge, leaving her standing alone with the tall woman from Baltimore.

"Why don't we sit over there?" She gestured to an empty wall and both women began to walk. "I need to call my mother to see if it's still a go." Stepping away for a moment, Paula quickly placed her call and confirmed a six minute hold. Atlantis would launch in 12 minutes.

"Your mom follows the launches too?"

"We all do. My dad works for NASA. He's there tonight at the Cape. I'm sure they're all holding their breath right about now."

"What does he do?"

"He helps put together the press kits, and he briefs reporters on the technical aspects of the launch. He's been there through the whole shuttle program."

"Wow, it must have been exciting growing up with all that."

"It was. We're all space junkies."

"So you're from Florida? I didn't know anyone was actually from here," Wynne joked.

"There aren't many of us, I'll say that. Now the shuttle's going to launch right over there," she explained, pointing to a spot on the southeast horizon. "I grew up just to the right of that pad, in Cocoa Beach."

"So I bet you've seen a lot of these."

"Eighty-eight, to be exact. This is number 113 for the shuttles, so I've actually missed about 25 of them. But if you add in all the rocket launches, I've seen about 200."

"You're kidding!"

"No, that's what space junkies do."

"Have you ever gotten really close?"

"Yeah, I've been to the press site a few times, but it's not a bad view from the beach at Cocoa. That's where my friends and I would go."

"And how many launches have you seen from up here?"

"About 20 or 30. But night launches aren't all that common."

"Well, then I really lucked out, not just because I'm here in Orlando to see it, but I have my very own expert right here with me."

"I'm no expert, but I like being close to it." Paula chided herself inwardly for liking the idea of being Wynne Connelly's very own anything. "Have you always lived in Baltimore?"

"Always." Wynne didn't mean to groan when she said that, but it still came out that way.

"Sounds like there's a story in there somewhere," the blonde woman kidded.

"No, there's not really a story. But sometimes I feel like I've gotten too settled there, like I might be missing out on something because I stayed close to home." *And maybe if I left, the other Connelly women would be forced to take care of themselves. At least I wouldn't have to.*

"You mean career-wise?"

"That's a lot of it. Now that Eldon-Markoff's bought up our company, I doubt my marketing role will get any bigger. In fact, if things keep going in the direction they're headed, I could be out of a job before too long."

"What would you do?"

"I'm not sure," Wynne answered honestly. "But maybe that's what I'd need: a good excuse to move out of Baltimore. And maybe I'd push myself to do something career-wise other than just go to work every day."

"Somehow you don't strike me as the kind of person that just mails it in." On the contrary, Paula got the impression that Wynne Connelly was a lot like her when it came to that old-fashioned Puritan work ethic.

"No, I wouldn't say that I did that. I guess I'd like to do more, though. And I don't think that's going to happen if I limit myself to Baltimore."

"Yeah, I can relate to that. I've passed up a few chances to move up over the years because I didn't want to leave Orlando. But if I'm ever going to break into daytime management, that's what it's going to take."

"So you really like it here?"

"Oh yeah. I mean Orlando's okay. It's a pretty quick shot over to the beach. But what I really like about this place is this hotel. If I had to name my ideal job, it would be running this hotel."

"Well, from what I can see, I'd say you're already doing that," Wynne offered, "and you're doing it very well."

"Thanks, but I'm only helping to hold down the fort at night. I don't get to make the real decisions that affect how things are done. But that's my goal, and like I said, I'll probably have to relocate if I'm ever going to see it."

"Who knows? Maybe things will work out."

"Maybe...but I'm not holding my breath," Paula lamented. "Hey guys, two minutes!"

The women settled back in anticipation of the spectacular show, each glad for this occasion to get to know a little about the other. Though their jobs were very different, it was interesting to realize how much they had in common, at least from a career standpoint. It was nice to think they might be able to forge a friendship, even if it fell away when Wynne's work in Orlando was done.

"There it is!" Paula shouted, pointing to an orange glow on the dark horizon. A bright yellow burst slowly became a towering stream that arced across the night sky.

"Wow!" That was all that Wynne could articulate.

"Yeah, pretty amazing, isn't it?"

"Wow!" The woman from Baltimore had never grasped the reality of the space program until just this minute. Sure, she'd read the news, especially the coverage of the disasters, but seeing that trail of fire gave it a personal meaning she'd never felt before.

In less than three minutes, it was gone, the glowing orange vapor trail its only visible remnants.

"That was one of the most magnificent things I've ever seen," Wynne gushed with obvious emotion. "I mean, it was almost surreal thinking about those seven astronauts riding on the top of all that fire. I just...I don't know, it's like I just kept thinking about the people in it."

"That's the same way I see it, and the way most of the folks at NASA see it." Paula was both astounded and pleased to see Wynne so moved by the experience. Most people never looked past the thunderous rocket to see the humanity, which was to Paula and her family the heart and soul of the space program.

Wynne laid her hand on the shoulder of her new friend. "Paula, I can't thank you enough for

bringing me up here tonight. I'm going to remember this for a very long time."

"I'm really glad you were here. Not many people get it like you did, you know, that it's not just a bunch of technology strapped onto a giant Roman candle."

"Well surely after the Challenger and Columbia, people can see past all that."

"They do for a while, but then they start to take it all for granted again. Believe me, that never happens at our house."

"I don't think it's ever going to happen again at mine," Wynne said sincerely. "Really, thank you for this."

"You're welcome," Paula answered smiling. "Well I, uh...suppose I should be getting back to work." What she really wanted to do was sit up here on the roof for a few hours and learn all about this woman from Baltimore.

"That's too bad. It would be nice if we could just go have a drink." It was a bold statement and Wynne knew it, but she had an inkling that Paula would be receptive, at least to the idea of talking more; but the point was obviously moot, as she was on duty.

"I really wish I could." The hotel manager meant that and more. *You probably wouldn't ask if you knew what I really wanted.* "Maybe it'll work out sometime so that we can."

The men had started to gravitate toward the top of the stairs, waiting for their escort to unlock the door.

"So why do you keep this door locked?" a man asked jokingly.

"Aliens," Paula deadpanned. "We've had a real problem with them coming in this way. They slip into the Concierge lounge and load up on the hors d'oeuvres," she continued, "sometimes they walk out with six plates, one in each hand."

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Wynne stepped out of the bath, wrapping up at once in a large fluffy towel. Her leg and hip felt wonderfully relaxed, and if she went right to bed, she probably wouldn't even need to take the usual ibuprofen.

It would be great to have a tub like this one at home, she thought, but neither of the bathrooms in her small two-bedroom townhouse would accommodate a tub that large. Too bad, though. It was funny that she slept better here in a hotel than she did in her own home. Then again, there was

nothing funny about that at all, she thought dismally.

Wynne had called home before her bath to check in and to report her excitement about witnessing the launch. Her mom seemed to be managing fine on her own this trip, as Janelle had been able to stop by and look in.

As she readied for bed, the tall woman's thoughts turned back to her evening on the roof with Paula McKenzie. There were many things about the night shift manager that were overtly attractive: she was undeniably pretty, with her long blonde hair, bright green eyes, and petite figure; and she carried herself with an air of authority that, for Wynne, was almost irresistible. Too few women that she knew had that trait - Cheryl Williams was certainly an exception. Wynne not only admired it, but wanted too to emulate it.

But there was something about Paula McKenzie that was not overt, something that beckoned Wynne's attention right away in a way she hadn't felt since her last crush almost eight years ago. Interestingly, that had been yet another strong independent woman: Marlene Cox, the owner of Gone Tomorrow Tours. Over time, that crush ran its course and dissipated, thanks in no small sum to the looming reminder of Marlene's husband. There was nothing to be gained from pining for a happily married straight woman.

Wynne had pored over her feelings for Marlene for a year or two, asking herself again and again what had made her respond so, and how could she find that same thing in someone who was attainable. As a new hire, the marketing director was nurtured by her boss, made to feel like an important cog in the company, and eventually given uncommon autonomy with regard to marketing decisions. She answered this trust with hard work and loyalty.

So why was Paula McKenzie stirring those same feelings that Marlene had evoked so many years ago? Most likely it was because she was giving Wynne special attention...and that made the dark-haired woman feel good because it was coming from someone whose authority she admired. That was the pattern, and that was why Wynne had always found it so difficult to connect with most women.

The rational part of her said that Paula was just doing her job, making guests feel welcome and at home. As for the upgrade...that was obviously a promotion to encourage guests to spend more - and in Wynne's case, it had worked. Sure, she was invited to the roof tonight to watch the launch, but then so were all of the others in the Concierge lounge.

But another part of Wynne saw something else...interest, perhaps. There was no ring on Paula's finger that said she had a husband or fiancé, and she hadn't gravitated to the men on the roof. And it had seemed to Wynne that Paula genuinely liked her, aside from her professional rapport.

When she finished in the bathroom, the tall woman hung the towel on the back of the door and turned out the lights. Foregoing the usual nightshirt, she slipped nude between the cool sheets to continue thinking about Paula McKenzie.



Wonder what she's thinking.... [Part 2](#)

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~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

**Part 2**

**Chapter 4**

Paula pulled her dark green Mazda Miata into the double driveway of her parents' home, glad for the shade of her brother's minivan. Most likely, everyone was already out back in the pool getting an early start on their respective sunburns. All of the McKenzies, including her brother's wife and children, were blue- or green-eyed blondes who burned easily, though Paula fared better than the rest. She was, however, prone to getting freckles on her arms, nose and cheeks, and that was a source of great consternation to someone who was 32 years old.

"Anybody home?" she yelled from the foyer.

"Paula?" Her father's voice called from the kitchen.

"Dad!" Without delay, the young woman went straight to her father to deliver the hug she'd been saving ever since Monday night when the shuttle launched. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, hon, but save it for when she touches down." Everyone at NASA was watchful of the re-entry this time, just as they had focused on the launches for years after the Challenger accident.

"Tell you what, I'll give you another one for that. But the launch was a beauty."

"Yes, it certainly was." Ray turned to pick up the plate of hamburger patties on the counter. At

59 years old, Ray McKenzie still boasted a full head of wavy graying blond hair and a slender physique, the latter thanks to his daily run along the beaches on the Cape.

"You want any help?"

"Nah, go say hi to everyone. I've got the easy job."

"Okay, but let's talk later. I want to hear how the mission's going." Her father had a gift for translating all of the technical mumbo-jumbo into interesting stories and facts. When she was in junior high school, she and her brother Rod had made a game of getting their dad ready for the reporters by firing questions at him during dinner. The tradition had carried over to this day.

Paula walked through the open French doors to the large screened-in patio, where - as predicted - Rod and his wife Adrienne were in the pool with their 5-year-old son Josh, and 3-year-old daughter, Jordan.

"Hey, baby!"

"Mom!" Paula hugged her mother like a long lost relative, though they had seen each other only two weeks ago. The launch of Atlantis had brought welcome stress to all of the McKenzies, and they naturally drew closer to share it.

"I thought you were going to cut your hair." Maxine McKenzie snagged the ponytail that protruded from the back of her daughter's USS Columbia cap.

"I chickened out," Paula admitted. "But I made another appointment for the week after next."

"Pauwa!" A very wet 5-year-old wrapped his arms around his aunt's legs to say hello.

"Hi Josh!" Ignoring the fact that her nephew was dripping, Paula bent down for a big hug. Not to be outdone, her niece soon joined them, dripping as well. "Hi Jordan!"

"So now that you're already wet, you should come on in," her brother shouted from the pool. Rodney McKenzie was a building inspector for Brevard County, an important job in a coastal community that got its share of hurricanes.

"No thanks. It's still too cold for me." Today was the first day the McKenzies had used their pool since October. Though temperatures would only climb to the mid-70s, everyone was antsy to hurry spring along. "You guys doing alright?"

"We're good. Did you see the launch?"

"Of course. I even took some of the guests on the Concierge floor to the rooftop to watch it. Where'd you guys go?"

"I went to the press site," Rod answered. "Adrienne and the kids went to the causeway."

"You went to the press site?" Paula was so jealous! She rarely got to go because of work, but the press site at the Kennedy Space Center where her father worked was the best place to experience the liftoff. Situated next to the giant Vehicle Assembly Building, the press site was eight miles from the launch pad. The flagpole and six-foot high digital clock in the foreground were staples of NASA news coverage.

"The next launch is scheduled for a Saturday," her father chimed in. "Let me know if you can make it and I'll get you a pass."

"Cool!" Paula's first thought was about how nice it would be if Wynne could come along. It wouldn't be a problem getting her a pass, but it would all depend on whether or not she would be coming to town that weekend and if she could come a couple of days early.

It was a typical Saturday at the McKenzie household. Paula and Rod quizzed their dad through lunch about the mission, then she spent an hour or more on the floor with the kids before they settled down for an afternoon nap.

Maxine McKenzie had decidedly mixed feelings about her daughter's twice-monthly weekend visits to Cocoa Beach. She loved spending time with Paula, and especially liked the way the whole family stayed connected. But if Paula was here with her family, that meant she probably wasn't seeing anyone, and that made Maxine sad. In the last nine years, she had met only one woman in her daughter's life, but that relationship had lasted only six or eight months. They'd talked about it before, and Paula had explained how difficult it was to date someone when you were off only two nights a weeks. But the mother suspected it was more than that. It was almost like she'd just given up on finding someone to be with, and that she was satisfied to have her job be the center of her life.

The period after Paula graduated from high school was a difficult time in the McKenzie household, especially when their daughter opted to postpone college to travel throughout Europe for a year with a friend.

*"Because this is my last chance to do this for the next 50 years!" the teenager pleaded. "I've saved enough money to live on, and we'll stay in hostels and I'll get a rail pass."*

*"But you've already been accepted at Gainesville. All your friends are going to college now," Maxine reasoned.*

*"And that's another thing, Paula. You were all gung-ho about college until you started hanging out with Shauna Golding. Now she's got you talked into running off to Europe like you haven't a care in the world." Ray McKenzie couldn't put his finger on it, but something about his daughter had changed in the past four or five months. "Are you...?"*

*Paula tensed with fear. She didn't want to be having this conversation. She wasn't ready. Hell,*

*her mom and dad weren't ready.*

*"Are you doing drugs?" he finally finished.*

*Paula slumped into her chair and sighed, unable to stifle a chuckle at her father's ludicrous question. "No, Dad. I'm not doing drugs."*

*"Then what has changed?" His eyes were pleading, not accusatory, but concerned.*

*The teenager sighed again, tears pooling in her eyes. They were going to hate her for this. "What's changed is that...Shauna and I are in love with each other. And we want to go so we can be together, so we can be away from all the people who just don't understand that."*

*Paula's admission took her father completely by surprise. Not so with Maxine, who had seen this day coming for quite some time. She'd watched how Paula had treated her dates so casually, and how caring and generous she was to the girls she was close to. She took on their problems, and pushed herself to be there for these girlfriends; but she'd shown no such feelings for any of the boys she'd gone out with.*

*"Paula...", the man struggled to find the right words, "I'm just worried that you'll lose sight of all the plans you've made for your future." Hadn't she talked about having children someday?*

*"I won't, Dad. I'll come back and start college next year. And maybe I'll go to summer school and make up the time."*

*"I was thinking about..." the other plans. He let it go.*

Paula returned from Europe in early December that year without Shauna. Their relationship had been based on too few things in common, and was destined to fail, but Paula had never regretted the trip. In January, she began study at the University of Florida, graduating three and a half years later with her class in business, her concentration in hospitality management.

Still, it had taken her family almost three years to really come to grips with Paula being gay. They had hoped during that time that she would get over this phase in her life, but gradually they came to accept that she wouldn't. To this day, Paula didn't feel comfortable - or maybe it was that she didn't feel secure - about bringing girlfriends to meet her family, so it was easy to assume that she had no one in her life.

Maxine knew her daughter as well as a mother could, and something was different today - something that hadn't been there only two weeks ago. Paula was relaxed and happy, and she had hardly mentioned work at all...except for the bit about taking the guests up on the roof for the shuttle launch. Even then, she'd lost the usual serious tone she invoked whenever she spoke of her job. *Maybe she's met someone.*

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Wynne crawled painfully across the floor in her mother's bedroom, following the extension cord to its end behind the television.

"Well, it's no wonder the fuse blew. I'm surprised you haven't burned the house down!" she muttered to herself. "Mother!"

Wynne counted seven electrical appliances feeding off two adaptors and the extension cord. More than likely, three or four at a time was enough to overload the circuit.

"What? Did you find the problem?" Kitty Connelly entered the room to find her daughter sprawled on the floor, her head behind the TV. She was glad that her oldest daughter was so handy.

Wynne patiently explained both the problem and the danger of having too many things plugged into the same outlet, especially when so many - the TV, the VCR, the lamp, the small space heater - were turned on at the same time.

"But I need all of those things. How can I read the TV listings without the light?" she asked indignantly, adding "And you don't expect me to sit up here and freeze!"

"No, but you're going to have to plug some of this stuff into different outlets." One by one, the tall woman rearranged things so that the clock radio and CD player now worked off a plug on the far side of the room, and the space heater used an extension cord that ran into the hallway.

"But that looks terrible to have that out there," the elder Connelly whined.

"It's only temporary, until you get an electrician over here to run another outlet in this room off a different fuse."

"Now that's so unnecessary. I've lived in this room for 37 years, and I never needed another outlet before."

"But you have all this stuff now, Mom." Wynne gestured at the various items about the room. When her husband died, Kitty gradually used less and less of the large Tudor house, creating her own personal space in her large bedroom. "It isn't a choice. You can't leave all those things plugged in there. It's dangerous, and besides, Sophie might come in here sometime and play with all those cords and get shocked." Invoking her niece's name would do the trick.

"I suppose you're right."

"Can you find an electrician in the Yellow Pages and tell him what it is you need?"

"I don't know if I can remember all that."

Wynne always hoped for a different answer, but she never got it. It would be up to her to find someone to come over and take care of this.

"Okay, I'll do it on Monday. But you'll have to show him what you need when he gets here." She walked her mother through the directions until she was satisfied that the woman understood. Together, they returned to the first floor of the old house, where Wynne collapsed on the couch and tried to massage the soreness from her leg.

"It still hurts you so much, doesn't it, sweetheart?" Tears sprang to the woman's sad brown eyes as she watched her oldest daughter fight the pain that dogged her every day. "You're going to have to have that other surgery or it will never get better."

"I know...I just can't do it right now, Mom." Wynne knew that the surgery to bond her splintered femur was the last procedure planned for her recovery, but she just couldn't bear giving in to the doctors again and laying up for another four to six weeks. It was especially true now that she had this added responsibility in Orlando, and besides, who would change the light bulbs and fuses at her mother's house?

"Auntie Wynne!" An excited 2-year old barreled across the room to deliver a hug and kiss to her beloved aunt. Sophie wished her Auntie Wynne could live with them too.

"Hey, angel. How's my girl?" Wynne adored her sister's child like she was her own. "How are you doing, Janelle?"

Wynne's younger sister was hot on the heels of her little girl, who had torn through the house after recognizing her auntie's Volvo in the driveway. Janelle was as much like their mother as her older sister was like their father. Like Kitty, Janelle was average height, with expressive brown eyes and auburn hair; more auburn today than it had been last week, Wynne noted. Her sister had done a six-year stint in the Navy and was now finishing up her health technology degree.

"I'm good. We've just been to the park, where somebody went on the big swing all by herself!" she bragged.

Her eyes wide, Wynne turned to the little girl. "All by yourself?"

Sophie nodded proudly.

"What a big girl you're getting to be!"

"Do you have to head back to Orlando tomorrow?" Janelle asked.

"No, this is my week to be here." Wynne found now that she had to work like a dog when she

was home to make up for being out of the office so much. Her inbox was always crammed full on Thursday morning, as no one else could deal with marketing issues in her absence. In fact, she planned to work at home tonight and tomorrow afternoon to catch up.

"Will you stay for supper?" Kitty asked hopefully, knowing in advance that her daughter would decline.

"No, I need to get back home, but thanks. And I'll call the electrician on Monday, but don't use all that stuff at the same time, okay?"

"Whatever you say. You know I depend on you to help me out with those things."

*And with everything else, Wynne thought resignedly as she stood to leave.*

Kitty watched her oldest limp down the steps from the porch to her car. It nearly broke her heart to still see the remnants of that awful night when they'd nearly lost her. Since the accident, Wynne was a different person - a sadder person - and Kitty suspected that the lingering injuries were only a small reason for her melancholy.

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After almost three hours online, Wynne disposed of the final message in her mailbox. Between the time she'd put in last night and this afternoon, she'd pretty much caught up enough to start the week at Gone Tomorrow Tours with her head above water. It would be another frantic week, trying to get everything done - at work, at home, at her mother's home - before heading out again next Sunday for Orlando.

Boy, had she ever changed her tune about that part of her job. The bi-monthly trips she had originally dreaded had become both a respite from the responsibility and something of an adventure, thanks in part to her new friend at the hotel. Wynne knew she had no business letting her mind wander to Paula McKenzie, but it wasn't something she could stop...or wanted to stop.

No matter how many times she told herself that Paula was just doing her job, it was hard to overlook the feeling that the pretty blonde was going out of her way to connect. Wynne fished her wallet from her briefcase and located the business card she'd been given: *Paula R. McKenzie, Shift Manager*. With an email address, she noted.

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Paula finished the last of her report to management on the activities of the week. Since it was Sunday night, Rusty was filling in at the desk to help handle the rush. With her work done, she knew she should relieve him so that he too could wrap up his paperwork, but Paula couldn't resist using this rare time alone to check out the company's job postings. She long ago acknowledged that it wasn't likely she'd advance here in Orlando. Add to that the fact that her life - not just here at work, but all around - was growing increasingly stagnant. As much as she hated to leave this hotel, it might be time to consider making a change. *Perhaps there's something open in the DC area*, she thought as she logged on to the Weller Regent network.

But that could wait. She had mail from KWConnelly!

*Hi Paula,*

*I just wanted you to know that I've followed the news of the shuttle mission very closely, and look forward to seeing its triumphant return on Friday. Thank you ever so much for including me last week in that special viewing on the roof. Honestly, I can't tell you how much that meant, or how many times I've thought of that magnificent sight since then.*

*I look forward to my trip next Sunday to the Weller Regent, and I hope we'll have another chance to say hello.*

*Thank you again,*

*Wynne*

Paula forwarded the note to the ISP she used for personal mail. If she were going to forge a friendship with this intriguing woman, she'd have to do it out of the prying eyes of their network administrators.

## **Chapter 5**

Paula had hoped to be working the front desk when the woman from Baltimore made her appearance at the Weller Regent on Sunday night, but it was not to be. Instead, she found herself



on the 14th floor in the middle of a domestic dispute that was growing nastier by the minute.

"Mrs. Frandle, I need to know if you wish to press charges. If you choose to do that, I'll call the Orlando Police Department, and they can be here in five minutes. If you decide you'd rather not, our security staff will escort your husband from the premises for the night, and hopefully he'll cool off." Paula stood in the bathroom with the door closed watching Karen Frandle shake as she held ice to her bleeding lip. "The decision is entirely up to you."

"I don't know," the crying woman sighed. "What do you think I should do?"

"I'm just not qualified to give you advice on this. But I'll do whatever you say." *I would have his ass thrown in jail.*

"I'm scared if you take him away tonight he's going to go nuts on me when he gets back," she whimpered. "What if they just took him out for a while and brought him back?"

"I'm afraid we can't do that, Mrs. Frandle. Based on what we've heard and seen tonight, your husband is behaving violently, and it's our policy to remove people like that from the premises and to not allow them back." After nine years, Paula was no longer surprised at the incidence of domestic violence, even among couples who seemed to exude an air of sophistication.

"Then I guess we'll just both leave," the woman finally said with indignation. At once, she exited the bathroom and announced that they would depart.

"I'm not paying for this night!" Howard Frandle barked as he began to throw his belongings in a suitcase.

Paula stiffened for the inevitable confrontation. Like other upscale hotels, the Weller Regent's policy upon eviction with cause was to charge for the night, as it was a well-known scam by some of the more unscrupulous guests to stage incidents that would absolve them of charges. "Mr. Frandle, your credit card has already been charged. It's clearly stated in our materials that daily charges are incurred if guests fail to vacate or if they are removed from the premises after 1 p.m."

"Then I'll just call my credit card company and cancel payment."

"If you do that, Mr. Frandle, the Weller Regent will file theft charges with the Orlando Police Department, and you will be summoned to appear in court." *Pay me now, pay me later.*

"Let's get out of here, Karen!" he ordered. "This hotel chain will never get my business again!"

*Let's hope not.* Paula waited for the couple to finish packing then walked with the two security guards to escort them from the building. "Give them a parking pass, and make sure you see them leave the premises," she whispered as the foursome exited the elevator and walked toward the parking garage.

A quick look at her watch told her that she'd likely missed the arrival of Wynne Connelly, and thanks to having spent the last hour and a half in this domestic dispute, she was going to be chained to her desk for the rest of the night.

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The alarm rudely jarred Wynne from a comfortable sleep at 6:15 a.m. "Time to hit the fitness room," she grumbled to herself, knowing full well that the 30 minutes she spent each day on the exercise bike was the only thing that kept her mobile.

She had been disappointed last night not to have seen or heard from Paula, especially after they had traded emails a couple of times last week. But Wynne had to remind herself that while she was at leisure at the Weller Regent, Paula was not. The shift manager probably had important things to do, and it was stupid for Wynne to be placing expectations on her time.

On her way to the bathroom, the tall woman spotted an envelope on the floor, pushed under her door sometime after she retired at a quarter to midnight. On hotel stationery, the writer had inscribed her name neatly, but with a slight backward slant. *Left-handed.*

*Wynne,*

*Welcome back to Orlando. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to say hello last evening. We had a few emergencies and I ended up in my office until two a.m. getting my paperwork finished.*

*If I miss you tonight in the Concierge lounge, I'll try to call before it gets too late.*

*Paula*

*p.s. That was some landing on Friday, wasn't it?*

Wynne smiled and folded the note. *So she tried. I guess that's good, huh?* On the other hand, it was increasingly clear that even if they were able to connect here at the hotel, Paula's job left her with little time to just talk a little. It would certainly be difficult for them to get to know each other, but Wynne wanted to try.

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"Okay, I'm ready." Paula gripped the arms of her chair and squeezed her eyes tightly shut. A few snips later it was too late to change her mind. "Done?"

"I'm done with that part. You want to see?" Carla held out the long blonde ponytail.

"No! Finish it!" Paula hadn't worn her hair short since the summer she'd left for Europe.

Carla spun her around to face the mirror. "Okay, here's what I want to do...."

Wynne had put in a longer day than usual, starting the morning off at a breakfast meeting with Doug, Cheryl, and Ken Markoff, the CEO at Eldon-Markoff. Cheryl had provided her boss with regular updates on the progress of the planning committee, but until today, he hadn't actually met her crew of two.

Now she was beat, eager to head upstairs, grab a bite to eat, and settle in for an early soak in the jetted tub. Paula didn't work on Tuesdays, so she wouldn't be coming around tonight to the Concierge lounge; there was no point in hanging out there. Her vigil had been rewarded last night when the pretty blonde had stopped by briefly to say hello, and to apologize for not having more time.

Wynne rounded the corner for the elevators, stopping short when the reflection from a broad mirror on the opposite wall caught her eye. Turning to face the beauty salon in the small row of shops, she saw Paula - with short hair - draped in a black plastic cape, her eyebrows raised in doubt.

*I think I need a manicure.* She'd just gotten one on Saturday, but here was finally an opportunity to talk to a very captive Paula McKenzie.

"Good afternoon, is there any chance I could get a manicure?"

"Of course," answered the stylist. "Please have a seat and I'll go get Elena."

As she disappeared into the back, Wynne approached to stand directly behind her new friend, whose green eyes were wide with astonishment at the arrival of her favorite guest.

"Getting a trim?" Wynne would need a new fantasy. Not a problem, from the looks of things.

"Just a small one," Paula almost squeaked.

"I bet it'll look great," the brunette reassured. "Have you worn it short before?"

"Not since high school."

"I think it's going to look fabulous," she said again, this time in a low timber that made the blonde woman shudder.

Wynne took a seat facing the stylist's chair and readied for her manicure. *It's going to look sexy as hell.*

A talkative Hispanic woman soon joined them and began to make fast work of the dark-haired woman's almost impeccable nails. She and the stylist bantered back and forth, mostly in Spanish, and apparently about Paula's new do. On occasion, the blonde woman would chuckle, obviously understanding their words, but not participating in the conversation.

"They're talking about my boss, Rusty Wilburn," Paula explained. "He's in love with the girl at the Brooklyn Deli down the street."

"I know the Brooklyn Deli. I get lunch there sometimes."

"Rusty walks down there every day on his break to see this girl, but he always stops in here first to get advice from these ladies on how to act and what to say."

"So are they helping the guy, or are they setting him up to crash and burn?"

"Mostly, they're helping. But he's really bashful, so they get a kick out of telling him to say or do stuff he'd never have the nerve to do," she laughed.

Carla was almost finished with the masterpiece that was Paula's new hairstyle. She continued to jabber in Spanish, and this time, all three women laughed aloud.

"Now, she's giving me advice on my love life," Paula translated.

"This should be interesting." *Indeed.*

"In English, Carla. And throw in a little wisdom for our guest here," she said, indicating the tall woman at the table. "This is what I have to put up with on a daily basis."

"Okay, I was just saying that a man likes to think he's in charge, so even if he isn't you have to make him feel that way. Don't you think that's true, Miss?"

Wynne laughed in amazement. "I don't have a clue what men like, but if they need all of that, why would anybody want one?"

"Here, here!" Paula cheered, turning quickly to cast a knowing look into the beautiful blue eyes. If that meant what she thought it meant, it was definitely the right answer!

Wynne smiled back, her look a confirmation of their coded exchange. *Glad we got that settled.*

Paula took the offered handheld mirror to check out the back of her new style. It was short, just

barely touching her collar. Carla had styled it kind of puffy on top, spraying it to stay in place; but Paula fixed that quickly by running a hand through it and shaking it loose.

"You're messing up my hair!" Carla whined.

"It's my hair, and you fixed it like a helmet. I like it to look more natural."

"Let's ask our guest." Turning toward Wynne, the stylist posed the question. "Which do like better, the elegant way I styled her hair, or the mop she chose for herself?"

*Pretty hard to run your hands through all that hairspray.* "I think I prefer the more natural look," Wynne answered, casting a brilliant smile to the waiting blonde. "In fact, I think it looks fantastic."

"Thank you very much." Paula turned back toward Carla and smirked, mussing her hair again for good measure.

"You hurt me," Carla pouted.

"I'll tip you and you'll feel better," Paula answered, digging for her wallet.

Wynne did the same for her manicurist, and the two ladies exited the salon together.

"So you're off today," the tall woman observed. That meant they both had free time right now.

"Yeah, Tuesdays and Saturdays," Paula answered. "Do you have to go do some work now...or anything?"

"No, could I talk you into joining me for dinner?" The brunette gestured in the direction of the Weller Regent's five-star restaurant.

*Thank you God!* "I was about to ask you the same thing. But not here. Are you up for a ride?"

Wynne's face brightened in agreement. "Absolutely! It would be nice to see something of Orlando besides the office, the hotel, or the airport."

"Then let's do it!"

"I should change. Can you give me a minute?"

"Tell you what. I'll meet you in the parking garage on Level 2; just go down this hallway and out the door," she pointed over her shoulder, "and up one flight of steps. Look to your left and I'll be waiting."

"Ten minutes."

"Great!" Paula watched the woman head to the elevator bank before exiting out the side to the parking garage. Finally, she and Wynne were going to have a chance to get to know each other. Management at the Weller Regent would likely frown on this, but it wasn't forbidden, as long as she wasn't on hotel property.

Wynne merrily pushed through the door to her room, unable to suppress the smile she now sported. In the first place, she was going out to dinner with Paula, and that would be fun no matter what became of it. But for the bonus, she now knew that she and the very sexy blonde went to the same church, so to speak.

*You shouldn't be doing this*, a little voice cautioned. But damn it, it was just dinner and she was going to do it whether she should or not. There was very little in Wynne Connelly's life that wasn't an obligation or responsibility. Paula McKenzie was not.

*This is how it's supposed to feel*, she told herself, taking on the objections of her conscience. Through the years, Wynne had met dozens of women at parties, at clubs, through mutual friends. She'd followed up with a handful who seemed like the strong and independent type, going out a few times to see if anything sparked. When it didn't - and it never really had - she'd cool things and go back into hibernation again. On rare occasions, there'd be a sexual spark, but when she played it out, it was never attached to the kind of woman she wanted in her life.

Things were different with Paula, who was exactly the sort of woman Wynne wanted in her life. And though they barely knew each other, the spark was already there. How else could Wynne explain why she thought about this pretty blonde so much; why her breath caught when she saw that she had email from her; and why she was going out to dinner with her, even though the little voice told her she shouldn't?

Wynne slipped on the tan slacks and red sweater she'd worn on the flight down last Sunday, grabbing a blazer just in case it turned cool. Paula had been wearing black jeans and a long-sleeved white v-neck pullover, so she didn't want to be too dressed up.

Right on time, the tall woman emerged from the stairwell on the second floor of the parking garage. An engine roar got her attention as she eyed the roadster - top-down - pulling out of a space to draw to a stop in front of her. "Was this the runt of the litter?"

"Come on, it's bigger than it looks," Paula encouraged.

Wynne gamely complied, bending low to fold herself into the passenger seat. Little by little, she stretched her legs in front of her, surprised to find that they fit just fine. Leaning over the console, she peeked underneath the steering wheel. "Do you have to pedal?"

"Yes, it's how I keep in shape," Paula answered back, not missing a beat.

"You never struck me as the sports car type."

"This is probably the only thing about me that's not practical," she explained. "But I just love the

way it grips the road."

"That's probably because you're so much closer to it," Wynne kidded. "Do you have to drag your foot when you want it to stop?"

"Yeah, I'll let you know when," she teased back. "Do you like ribs?"

"Are you kidding? I love ribs!"

"Great! I've got the perfect place." Paula whipped out into traffic and made for the expressway. "You warm enough? This car's got a great little heater," she shouted.

"You drive around with the top down and the heater on?" Wynne brushed her hair from her face, but to no avail.

"Sometimes," she answered defensively. Paula glanced over at her new friend's struggle with the wind. "Here, have a hat. I won't need it anymore," she grinned, running her fingers through her short hair.

The brunette noted the USS Columbia insignia, took it thankfully and pulled her long locks through the opening in the back. Now that her hair wasn't blowing all over the place, this open-air ride was rather nice. Paula had slipped on a jacket, but Wynne was comparing this to the winter in Baltimore, and it didn't seem cold at all.

Fifteen minutes later, Paula pulled into Buck's, a family style restaurant with a sports bar décor. Wynne twisted her body to climb out. "Wait, I'm having a *déjà vu!* It's from when I was born!"

"Very funny," Paula chuckled. "So I bet you drive one of those road monsters."

"A Volvo sedan. I'd crush this thing like a bug."

"I'll have you know I'm not easily intimidated," Paula answered, tossing up an eyebrow.

"I think I already figured that out about you."

A few minutes later the women were seated across from one another in a booth, the tall wooden seat backs affording them a measure of privacy in this otherwise bustling venue.

"I recommend the pork ribs," Paula announced, "with the hot sauce if you're man enough."

"Then I'll have the pork ribs, with *extra* hot sauce."

"Ooooo, tough girl."

"Believe me, I am a tough girl," Wynne answered back, now arching her own brow. "And you're not easily intimidated. I sure hope we never tangle, Miss McKenzie."

*Speak for yourself.* "Believe me, with all the stuff I have to go through at work, the last thing I want to do on my free time is tangle." Paula went on to relate her Sunday night experience with the Frandles, and to tell a few stories about breaking up drunken parties, and even a fight or two.

"You know, that's something I noticed about you right off that first night we met, when you handled that man in front of me. You just had this air of authority about you. I really admire that in people."

"Well thank you. And I bet you're really good at what you do."

"To tell you the truth, I am good at my job. But I don't think that's going to be enough to save it." Now it was Wynne's turn to talk about work, about how the company she worked for had been acquired by Eldon-Markoff, and how she was helping them centralize the marketing operations in a way that would likely put her out of a job. "The vice president for sales and marketing is great, though. In fact, she's a lot like you in a way. I mean, both of you sort of..."

"Walk softly and carry a big stick."

"Exactly."

Dinner arrived and both women dug in, each daring the other to add Tabasco to the already fiery barbecue sauce. The conversation was easy, Wynne thought, like they were already friends. And it was fun to see this playful side of the usually serious night manager. Paula talked again about her family, and how proud everyone was of the recent shuttle mission. Wynne told all about her mother's ineptitude around the house.

"So I have to congratulate you on that little response of yours to Carla's philosophy of men," Paula teased. "How did you know I'd get it?"

"Well, I wasn't sure you would until you spun around in the chair and flashed me that big smile...sort of like the one you're wearing now."

"I had to see the look on your face, just to make sure. I thought we were on the same wavelength, but you never want to assume anything."

"What gave you the idea we were on the same wavelength?"

"Oh, I don't know. That first night we met, I just sort of got the feeling you were checking me out while I was checking you in," Paula quipped.

"You did, did you? That's because you were flirting with me," Wynne accused playfully.

"Oh, no! You were the one doing the flirting. 'Shall I ask for you?'"

"Yeah, Miss 'Here's my card with my direct extension. If there's *anything* you need.'"



The blonde woman raised her hands to her blushing cheeks. "This from a woman who said 'I promise not to misbehave,'" she taunted.

Wynne pursed her lips indignantly for a moment, finally looking down as she nodded her head in mock shame. "I was flirting," she admitted softly.

"I knew it!"

"But so were you."

"So was I," Paula finally confessed, and both women laughed.

As they were talking, the waitress dropped by to discreetly deposit their check.

"Well thank you for being my dinner guest," Wynne said as she covered the check with her hand. After a brief argument, Paula acquiesced and thanked her companion, vowing that she would get the bill next time.

Wynne dropped some bills in the tray, grimacing as she stood.

"Are you okay?" Paula hadn't seen that look before.

"Yeah, my leg just gets really stiff when I sit for awhile."

"Is there anything I can do? I mean besides marching you outside and folding you into my tiny car?"

"No, I think that'll finish me off," Wynne laughed.

"I'm sorry. If I'd known two years ago that we'd actually be going out to dinner, I'd have bought a larger car." The women exited into the parking lot, Paula offering her arm to steady the hobbling woman.

"And if I could go back two years, I would stop at that intersection, even though I had the right of way."

"So it was a car accident?"

"Yeah, some kid stole a truck and was trying to outrun the cops. He hit me broadside."

"That's awful! Was anyone else hurt?"

Wynne nodded sadly. "The kid was killed. He was only 15 years old. I was alone in the car."

"Wynne, I'm so sorry to hear that. And that was two years ago?"

"Yeah. I've already had four surgeries on my leg. I need to have one more, but I just can't bring myself to schedule it."

"Will it fix this pain you have?"

"It should. But I'd be out of work for about a month, and back into physical therapy three times a week. I just don't have the time to do that right now." Wynne looked down at where her hand gripped Paula's arm, squeezing a bit before letting go to climb into the small car.

"Well you definitely win the Tough Girl Award, my friend."

As she had done on the ride over, Wynne put the USS Columbia hat back on, tucking her hair just right so it wouldn't blow. "It's great you have this hat," she said wistfully, remembering the sad day the crew was lost.

"That reminds me, the next launch is scheduled for a Saturday. If it works out that you can come down on Friday, I can get passes to the press site right there at the Cape," Paula offered.

Wynne tensed a moment. A weekend trip might prove difficult to pull off. "I'm not sure. If you'll let me know the date, I'll check my calendar."

Paula had expected a more enthusiastic response, but maybe it was a real hardship for Wynne to leave her family for that long. Her mother seemed awfully dependent.

Drawing close to the hotel, Paula decided that it would be easier for Wynne if she entered through the lobby than through the garage, given that the woman's leg was obviously bothering her now. That meant the entire staff would know by tomorrow that she'd been out tonight with the guest from Baltimore. *Oh, well.*

Reaching over the console before they pulled into the circle, she took the slender hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you very much for tonight. I had a lot of fun."

"Me too."

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*What the hell do you think you're doing?*

The soak in the swirling water had eased the throbbing in her leg, but Wynne was far from relaxed. The irony was that it was the fun she'd had tonight with Paula that was causing her to feel unsettled. She couldn't take this any further, but that didn't make her want it less. All night,

she'd been looking across the table, wanting to kiss those lips and pull that body to hers. Only in her fantasies, one of which she was going to enjoy right now.

## Chapter 6

"What is this stuff?" Rusty couldn't hide his disgust.

"It's called edamame, and you're not supposed to eat the whole thing. Just put it between your teeth and pull out the soybeans." Paula had insisted on something different tonight, despite Rusty's pleas to return to the deli.

"If I'd wanted beans, I could have gotten a bowl of chili and eaten them with a spoon."

"Rusty, I needed a break. You can go see her tomorrow night, and maybe she'll have had a chance to miss you."

"Did I tell you we went out again last Friday?"

"Only about 12 times, but if it makes you feel better, you can tell me all about it again."

"What if we talk about your lady instead?" He gestured to the monitor, which showed Wynne Connelly climbing again from a cab and collecting her things.

Paula had been watching the clock, knowing that Wynne would arrive sometime between 9:00 and 9:30.

"She is not *my* lady."

"You should go on down to the desk and check her in," Rusty suggested.

"Oh, I don't think so. Every single person on staff knows we went out the last time she was here, and I'd rather not be under their microscope. Besides, Jolene and Matthew have everything under control." The view had changed to the front desk, where Paula could see Wynne standing in line, looking around. The women had traded several emails over the last couple of weeks, agreeing to a movie and pizza on Tuesday night.

"Nobody's going to think anything about it," he reasoned. "Everybody knows by now that she's a regular, and they'll just think you're friends."

"That's exactly what we are, Rusty. But I'd just prefer that people not read any more into it."

"It's not like anyone will care if you're gay, Paula. Everybody knows that Matthew is, and no one gives him a hard time. Management isn't going to fire you, not with their non-discrimination clause."

"I know all of that on the surface, but you know what? If I come out to these people, the next time I have to reprimand someone, it'll be because I'm a fucking dyke, as if that makes my authority less valid. I'd rather it just be none of their business. Besides, it isn't like I have a personal life to keep private anyway."

The pair watched Jolene complete the check-in process for K. Wynne Connelly, who then turned toward the elevators. Rusty advanced the camera to capture that view, and they stared in silence as she stepped aside for passengers to depart, then disappeared as the door closed.

"At the very least, you should give her a call," he coaxed. Rusty liked his coworker a lot, but he couldn't understand why on earth someone who had so much to offer would keep to herself as Paula did. In the three years that they'd shared the night shift, he'd gotten to know her pretty well, and she'd only mentioned one casual girlfriend in all that time. Part of the problem, he knew, was their awful work schedule. Lucky for him that Juliana too worked the evening hours, and then, only part time.

"Later, maybe."

*In other words, when she was alone*, he thought. He'd think of a reason to make himself scarce in a half-hour or so.

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Wynne opened her briefcase and spread her materials out on a corner of the conference table. It was a quarter till nine; usually they started promptly at 8:30, but there was no sign that anyone else was even here. A feeling of dread swept over her as she feared that she'd gotten her weeks mixed up, or that they'd canceled this week and she'd forgotten.

"Good morning, sorry I'm late." Cheryl Williams bounded into the room with her typical exuberance. "Listen, we're going to move into my office to finish this up," she explained as she helped Wynne collect her papers.

"Is Doug already here?"

"No, Ken and I decided that it would be best to proceed with just the two of us. That might mean

an extra trip for you, but then again, we may be able to move through things a little faster with less discussion."

She meant fewer objections from Doug, Wynne knew.

"I'll be happy to do whatever you need, Cheryl."

"I know that about you, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." She led them into her corner office, where coffee and breakfast rolls were already set up. "I didn't get a chance to eat this morning, so I hope you don't mind. Help yourself."

"No thank you. I ate at the hotel."

"So how do you like the Weller Regent?"

"It's very comfortable. And it's quiet. I like that."

"So do I. There's a nice one in Washington, but the one in New York is my favorite. They also just opened a new one in Dallas and another in Denver."

"I haven't had the chance to try those."

"And speaking of Dallas, I'm sure you're wondering why we decided to take Doug out of the loop with regard to the marketing plan." Cheryl's eyes held a conspiratorial twinkle.

"I could guess, but I'd rather not."

"You're very diplomatic, Wynne. And you'd probably be right. It just seemed increasingly difficult to push ahead with Doug's constant objections, especially once it became apparent that he was opposed to anything that might weaken his own stature."

Wynne nodded in understanding. That was Doug in a nutshell.

"That makes me want to ask why you haven't had the same reaction." The words hung in the air for a moment, but before Wynne could answer, she continued. "It's become obvious - almost since Day 1 - that the streamlined sales and marketing plan is going to take away some positions, and yours is certainly at risk. You've seen that, but you don't seem to fight it at all. Why is that? Are you eager to be rid of Eldon-Markoff?"

"No, not at all. It's just that centralization is what's best for the company and the stockholders, and that's who I work for. I can sure see the handwriting on the wall, but that doesn't change what's a good business decision. What I know about Eldon-Markoff is that it's a fair employer, and I only hope to be treated fairly." *Well, there you go. My job's definitely on the block.*

"You will be, Wynne. If you've worried about that at all, let me put your fears to rest."

"Thank you."

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Paula pulled into the circle in front of the Weller Regent, waving politely to the valet crew. Wynne was waiting outside, and a young man hurriedly stepped forward to open the passenger door.

"Hello, Miss McKenzie. You ladies have a nice evening."

"Hi, Justin. Thanks." Paula shifted the car into gear and slowly edged out into traffic. Tonight, the top was up, as it had rained earlier in the day. "Hello again, Miss Connelly. Are you enjoying your stay at the Weller Regent?"

"Most certainly, Miss McKenzie. I especially like the way the hotel staff coordinates my entertainment schedule."

Paula grinned at her companion. She'd thought Tuesday night would never get here!

"So what are we going to see?"

The driver explained their choices and they settled on an action adventure flick that had gotten pretty good reviews. It turned out to be a pretty good story, and the special effects were spectacular.

But Wynne got distracted about halfway through and could barely concentrate on the film. Instead, she became focused on the fact that she wanted to hold Paula's hand. She'd told herself ever since her last trip to Orlando that the only way she was going to allow herself to socialize with this woman was if she kept things at a "friend" level, but now that they were here in the dark theater, linking her fingers with those of Paula McKenzie was about all she could think about. Finally, she picked up the drink from the cupholder they shared and moved it to her other side, raising the chair arm between them. In a not-so-subtle move, her hand crept over into Paula's lap until the younger woman grasped it with her own, entwining their fingers and squeezing. *Ahhhh!*

When the picture let out, the pair walked arm in arm to a small pizza restaurant nearby, Wynne limping slightly at the stiffness from sitting still for so long.

"You want to walk a little bit before we go in?"

"Yeah, that might be a good idea," Wynne agreed, though not liking the fact that her injury was dictating the course of their evening.

"Listen, I appreciate your being understanding about our not having much contact at the hotel. It just wouldn't look right. The tongues are probably already wagging anyway, but I don't want to give them anything to talk about at work."

"It's okay, Paula. I wouldn't want our friendship to create a problem for you at the hotel."

*So it's a friendship. That hand-holding thing was just...what the hell was it?*

"Are you out at work?" Wynne asked, interrupting Paula's musings.

"Not really. I mean, Rusty knows, but he's probably the only one." Paula went on to explain what she and her boss had talked about only two nights ago, and why she thought it best to keep private things private. "Of course, they're probably all speculating about you and me now anyway."

"Then maybe I should rent a car next time," she offered.

"I hate to have you do that. I should just get over it."

"No, I understand how it is, really."

"What about you? Are you out?"

"Mmmm, yes and no. The folks at the Baltimore office know, the ones who aren't clueless, that is. But I'm not out at Eldon-Markoff. I don't know how they'd feel about it, and I'd be afraid it might have an effect on my references."

"Surely, companies don't think that way anymore."

"You're probably right, but a lot of people still have their prejudices, and a reference might come down to one of those people, not a company policy."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, but we do it to ourselves, you know. When we hide in the closet it's like saying we know we're doing something wrong."

"That's a good point." They had circled the block and now stood again in front of the restaurant. "You ready to eat?"

"Sure, let's go."

Dinner conversation turned again to the subject of being out, this time, with their families. Paula related the story of how she told her parents, and their subsequent reaction.

"Even today, I don't think they're very comfortable with the idea. I've never really brought anyone around to the house, except Susan. She and I saw each other for a few months, but it never got really serious."

"How did your parents react to seeing you with someone?" Wynne asked.

"They were nice to her, but...kind of stiff. She wouldn't notice that, but I did. The thing is, though, I don't know if they were reacting to Susan, or to the idea of me with Susan."

"Have you ever talked with them about it?"

"Yeah, I've talked with my mom a little. She just says that she wants me to be happy. She wishes I could find a person to give my attention to, instead of the Weller Regent."

"Yeah, I guess parents are like that. I think they all want us to be happy, once they get over deciding what should make us that way."

Paula clinked her beer mug with that of her companion. "I'll drink to that. What was it like with your family?"

Wynne chuckled. "Well, it's kind of a funny story now, but it sure wasn't at the time."

"Something tells me this is going to be good."

"It was when I was in college at the University of Maryland. I was living at home, but I met this woman who lived near campus, and I started staying nights at her place. Mom went on and on about what a nice friend Judith was." Wynne stopped her story to take a drink.

"But then they started getting suspicious, right?"

The brunette shook her head. "Oh, no. It was much more melodramatic than that. You see, in college, your professors don't happen to care if you go by your middle name. They always call you by your first name, and mine is Katharine. But Judith didn't know that it was also my mom's name, and during summer vacation when she was home in Connecticut, she sent me this card with a picture of two naked women, and just as a joke, she addressed it to Katharine W. Connelly. Mom opened it and nearly had a heart attack, and of course she showed it to my dad. Then at dinner, she tossed it in front of me and Janelle grabbed it and started laughing her ass off. Mom was just glaring at me with her arms folded across her chest, and Dad was like 'pass me the potatoes.'"

"Oh, that's hilarious."

"As I said, it's funnier now than it was then. Mom stayed on my case for the next three years or so. Every woman I mentioned, she'd ask if that was my girlfriend. Finally when I told her yes once, she dropped it. But I have to give the woman credit - she's come around."



"Yeah, I give my mom and dad credit too. They're okay, and I'm pretty comfortable with them."

The waiter dropped off the check, and this time Paula insisted that it was her turn.

"I should probably get back to the hotel. It's almost midnight, and I have a breakfast meeting at 7:30."

Paula offered her arm as an escort and the two women walked slowly back to the parking lot. When they reached the car, they stopped, Paula guiding the tall woman to sit on the rear fender. "You know, there's one real big drawback to me having to drop you in front of a busy hotel."

*She's going to kiss me.*

Indeed, Paula stepped closer and placed a hand lightly on Wynne's shoulder. "Is this okay?" she whispered as she slowly lowered her head.

Wynne raised her hand and cupped the blonde head, pulling the lips toward her own. She had tuned out that voice telling her she couldn't have something as nice as this. Their kiss was coy at first, but soon, both women were breathing hard, open-mouthed as their tongues danced with a tentative passion. As her free hand made its way to Paula's hip and beyond, a pair of passing headlights stopped them short.

Stepping back, Paula looked into the dazzling blue eyes and smiled. "I really liked that, Wynne."

"Yeah, I could tell," the dark-haired woman said huskily. "So did I."

The women gazed for a few more moments into one another's eyes, both sensing a deep satisfaction at what they had just shared.

"I guess I should get you home."

"Then I suppose one of us should move."

"Oh, that would be me," Paula answered, stepping back to allow Wynne to stand. She unlocked the passenger door and held it while the tall woman slipped in.

*Too bad about that manual transmission,* Paula thought. She wanted to hold Wynne's hand again, but she needed both hands to drive in this downtown traffic. The hotel was only a few blocks away.

"So...are you coming back in two weeks?"

"That's still the schedule."

"The next launch is the last weekend in April. If you have a chance to check your calendar, let me know if you think you can be here and I'll get an extra pass to the press site."

"I forgot to look, but I will," Wynne promised. That was almost six weeks away, but she doubted she could swing it. There were just too many variables.

Paula wheeled the Mazda into the curved driveway. "Have a nice day at work tomorrow and a safe trip home. I had a really good time with you tonight."

The valet opened the passenger door. "Thank you. Me too."

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*I'm in such trouble here.*

Wynne readied for bed, her head swimming with the memory of Paula's mouth on hers. If that kiss was indicative of what else they might offer one another, it wasn't going to be easy to say no. But she couldn't do this, no matter how much she wanted to. This was getting too complicated.

Bet she "thinks" about stuff tonight too. <bg> [Part 3](#)

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~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

**Part 3**

**Chapter 7**

"Wow, where'd you get all this energy?" Val had been watching her friend for the last half hour, roaring through her circuit like a woman possessed. Paula was taking her time with all her reps so she'd get the maximum benefit, but as soon as she'd finish, she'd moved quickly to the next machine without a break.

"I don't know. I just feel...invigorated." In truth, Paula was still savoring her night out with Wynne last week, and was full of nervous energy in anticipation of the woman's return.

"You're in love," Val pronounced.

"I am not! We barely know each other."

"That may be true, but you've been in a great mood since last week, and you've talked about the woman almost nonstop."

"That doesn't mean I'm in love. But I do like her a lot." Paula mounted the ab cruncher and started her pulls. "And I think...she likes me...too," she puffed.

"Well, what's not to like about you? You remember Kevin, the guy I was dating for a while?"

"Yeah."

"He wanted to fix you up with one of his buddies and I told him I didn't think you'd be interested. He said, 'Aw, that's too bad. She's hot!'"

"Just...what I need...not!"

"So what do you think will happen with you two? I mean, the woman lives in Baltimore, right?"

"Yeah...but she's still...got about...four more trips here." It was hard to talk and crunch at the same time, but Paula couldn't be still. And besides, she didn't want to think about what would happen when Wynne's work in Orlando was through.

"And then what happens?"

"Don't know...we'll have to...cross that bridge...when we come to it."

"Slow down! You're making me sore," Val barked. "Are we going to run?"

"Ready when you are." Paula slid off the cruncher and grabbed her bottle of water.

"The way you are today, you'll probably run off and leave me in the dust."

"Only one way to find out," Paula yelled over her shoulder as she took off out the door in the direction of the jogging trail that ran between the condo property and the neighboring golf course. If they cut out to the sidewalk by the main roadway, they could loop around to the other side of the course, a two-mile circuit which they would run twice.

"By the way, I really like your hair that way," Val huffed as they settled into their pace.

"Thanks." And because all conversations had to eventually come back to the woman from Baltimore, Paula added, "Wynne likes it this way too."

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"So you write down all of the outstanding checks here and add them up," Wynne explained. "Then subtract that from what the statement says, along with the service charges, and add any deposits you've made that aren't on here...and this number should match the checkbook."

Wynne and her mother compared the two numbers.

"Great, and what do we do if they're different?" Kitty asked.

The brunette sighed in exasperation. "Well, that means that you probably either forgot to write down a check, or that your math is wrong."

Together they pored over the account until the mistake was found, finally bringing the checkbook into balance. Despite her frustration, Wynne was pleased that her mom was working so hard to learn this.

"Mom, you have to do this as soon as the statement comes in. If you don't, you'll lose track of what you spend and before you know it, you're overdrawn." *Again.*

"Okay, I'll do my best." Kitty hated being so dependent on her daughter, but her husband had always taken care of these things. "What are we going to do about the car?"

The tall woman sighed. Her mother had been reluctant to get rid of the Park Avenue, as it was the last vehicle her husband had purchased. But she had *never* thought to put oil in it, and it finally threw a rod and bit the dust. She called Wynne from a payphone, and her daughter picked her up and arranged to have the car towed.

"It's a goner. You're going to need a new car."

"What am I going to do? I don't know the first thing about buying a car."

"I'll go with you on Saturday. We'll find something nice, something Dad would have liked." Wynne threw in that last bit for encouragement.

"Thank you, honey. I honestly don't know how I'd manage without all the things you do."

*Neither do I, Mom.*

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"Did you see this letter from Starquest?" Rusty tossed the paper onto Paula's desk. "They're thanking us for handling their meeting, and they mention you by name."

The blonde woman chortled. "That's because I happened to be walking down the hallway when their chairman was locked out of his room in his underwear."

"Boxers or briefs?"

"Boxers, and they had 'Wednesday' stamped on the leg. But it was Friday."

"People would never believe the things we see in hotels," Rusty shook his head in amazement. "Remember that other guy who got locked out in his underwear?"

"You mean *her* underwear," Paula laughed. "Or the woman who..."

The phone on her desk interrupted their reminiscence, its caller ID flashing Front Desk.

"This is Paula...yeah..." She twirled around in her seat and grabbed the remote for the video camera display. "Okay, I see them...we'll be right down." Hanging up the phone, she turned to her boss. "Two busloads just pulled up with that country music band. You want to work the front desk or the bellmen."

Rusty groaned. "Bellmen." They would be here half the night again finishing up paperwork.

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Wynne sat solemnly in the back seat of the cab, accustomed now to the route from the airport and no longer taking in the sights.

*I should have just booked at the Hyatt*, she thought. No, the problem wasn't the hotel. The problem wasn't even that Paula McKenzie had kissed her, but that she had kissed back.

For the past two weeks, Wynne had berated herself for letting that happen, knowing that her own flirtations had helped to bring it about. She had nothing to offer Paula and it was wrong to lead her on. Even if she could keep her emotional distance - and that was a big "if" - it was wrong too to give in to that temptation, because Paula was worth more than just a sexual fling.

"Oh, great," she muttered, eyeing the buses in the circle. The line at check-in would be an hour long. Wynne paid the cabbie and exited when the valet opened her door.

"Would you like me to take your bag inside?" he asked.

"No, I'll take it myself. Thank you." No way was she going to turn her bag over to the bellman. She wouldn't see it again until midnight.

As expected, the check-in line held more than 30 waiting guests, all of whom seemed to know each other. Right away, Wynne's eyes went to the petite blonde who worked efficiently behind the counter, and her breath caught with surprise at how nice it was to see her. Keeping this desire in check was probably going to be harder than she thought.

"Excuse me, Miss Connelly?"

"Yes?" Wynne turned to see a tall red-haired gentleman, more sharply dressed than most of the other staff, but an employee just the same.

"Could I ask you step to over here, please?" He reached over and lifted her bag, extracting a small folder from inside his jacket. "I'm Rusty Wilburn, the Senior Shift Manager. Miss McKenzie took the liberty of checking you in already on the Concierge floor. Here is your room key. If you would kindly stop by in the morning and allow us to swipe your credit card, we can spare you this bedlam tonight."

"You are my hero, Mr. Wilburn," she gushed, recognizing the name as the boss Paula often talked about. "Thank you very much."

"No, I'm just the delivery boy. Paula says welcome."

Wynne turned again to glimpse the blonde behind the busy counter. "Please tell her I said thank you."

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"You know, we've made pretty good work of this, Wynne." Cheryl Williams sat in the floor of her office, surrounded by index cards that mapped the process of their proposed marketing plan. "I'd like to have this drawn up in a slide presentation...are you any good with that? I never had the patience to learn that program."

"I can do that. Shall I set up my laptop and lay it out?"

"Sure, why not? And then next time you come, I want to play with a few scenarios. Would that be hard to do? You know, different slides for each scenario? We're going to have to put this in front of Ken and Wendell, and it would be easier for both of them if we had it all laid out in a slide show." Wendell Martin was the vice president for investor relations. Ken, Wendell, and Cheryl would present their plan to the analysts in New York at the end of April, hoping that the cost-trimming and forward thinking would boost their stock value.

"It shouldn't be a problem, but it will take me a couple of hours," Wynne said.

"A couple of hours? You've got to be kidding! It would take Denise a couple of days," Cheryl exclaimed, the latter a reference to her administrative assistant. At once, her hand flew to her mouth as she realized that the woman whose desk sat just outside the door had probably heard her.

Wynne sniggered at Cheryl's gaffe, and at the sight of the impeccably dressed woman sitting cross-legged on the floor, her tailored skirt hiked up well above her knees. Their rapport had gotten a shot in the arm when Doug was dropped from the team. They chatted more while they worked, and even had lunch together a couple of times.

"Have you seen much of Orlando since you started coming down?"

"Not a lot. I did get out to dinner at a place called Buck's, and last week I saw a movie downtown."

"That's hardly what I call getting out. Tell you what," she said, pushing her nimble body off the floor and padding in her stocking feet to her desk drawer. "I have a gift certificate for Jack Elam's. Do you know that place?"

Wynne shook her head.

"It's the best seafood restaurant in Orlando. I won this in a raffle at the Chamber of Commerce, but my husband's allergic to seafood. Why don't you take it and ask someone to go?"

Wynne immediately thought of Paula. Though the woman had speeded her through check-in, they hadn't had a chance to connect last night. "Thank you, Cheryl."

"Do you know someone to invite? You want me to see if I can find someone to keep you company?"

"No, that's alright. I have a friend here in town that I can ask. But thank you. This is very generous."

"It's no big deal. Like I said, Jim won't eat there and I hate to see it go to waste." Cheryl slipped her shoes back on. "Listen, I have a meeting with Ken in about five minutes. Why don't I let you start working on those slides? Come on over to my desk and make yourself comfortable."

Wynne settled in as the woman left, at once feeling at home in the corner office. This was definitely the kind of career she wanted.

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Paula was irked at the report left by the two previous shifts on the behavior of their country western guests since check-in. Apparently, many had stayed awake until the wee hours of the morning, prompting several complaints about shouting in the hallways and loud music. And today, the first shift housekeepers were unable to rouse them to clean their rooms, leaving three times the usual workload for the skeleton staff on Paula's shift.

It was almost 10 o'clock when she got her first chance to visit the Concierge lounge. But as she feared, her friend wasn't there. Paula had hoped they would have a chance to get together again tomorrow on her day off, but as they hadn't yet set anything up, she was afraid that she'd lost the opportunity.

Checking to see that a light was on in room 2314, Paula contemplated her options. She could knock on the door, but Wynne might not welcome such an invasion of her privacy. Besides, if one of her staff saw her and reported it, it could potentially get her fired. The better option was to call.

Rather than use the house phone, Paula decided to return to her office and was thrilled to find that Wynne had already left a message for her.

*"Hi, Paula. This is Wynne. It's about 9:15, and I was calling to see if you might be free for dinner tomorrow night. My boss gave me a gift certificate for a place called Jack Elam's, and I hope you can be my guest...my driving guest, that is. Anyway, please give me a call in...2314. I'll probably be up another couple of hours. Oh, and sorry about the short notice, but I just got this today. Talk to you soon, I hope. Goodbye."*

Quickly, Paula dialed the number, hoping to finish her call before Rusty returned to their office.



"Wynne? It's Paula...I was just coming back to my office to call you...I'd love to go! Why don't I pick you up at seven out front?" She paged through the organizer on her desk for the number of the restaurant. "If you want, I'll call and get us a reservation...it's kind of dressy, but not formal. A skirt or a nice pantsuit will do just fine...Can't wait. See you tomorrow at seven."

Paula smiled and sighed as she plopped into her chair. She had another date with Wynne Connelly.

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At seven sharp, Paula wheeled the Miata into the circle, her breath hitching as she eyed the long-legged brunette in the black suit, the skirt well above the knee, but professional-looking nonetheless. Wynne Connelly was one beautiful woman.

Paula had chosen an olive green silk pantsuit for herself, with a pale yellow top. Most of her dresses - purchased for weddings or parties - were too dressy for a simple date, especially since she figured that Wynne had packed nothing of the sort. This pantsuit was one of her favorites, and a welcome departure from the skirt and blazer she wore five days a week.

The two women made casual conversation during the short drive to the restaurant, Paula running down her list of problems with the country western group, Wynne recounting how she'd impressed her boss with the first draft of their slide presentation. The brunette folded her hands in her lap, resisting the urge to take the smaller hand as it rested in invitation on the console.

Paula sensed a distance, but it wasn't necessarily uncomfortable. It was as though they had to re-establish the familiarity they'd enjoyed two weeks ago, when their flirtations and admissions had eventually led to that kiss.

The hostess seated them at a small table for two that bordered the main passageway to the front door.

"Have you ever noticed that two women in a restaurant tend to get the worst tables?" Paula asked. "Look around. There are tables with two men, and with men and women, and they're all in the center of the room. But all three of the tables by the wall have two women."

"I'm not surprised. I've noticed that when the planes are full, women end up in the center seats. And let me tell you, I do not like center seats," Wynne scoffed.

"So you're the marketing expert. Why is it that they do that? Do they really not value women as customers?"

"Well, in some businesses they certainly do. Department stores, grocery stores, even the auto industry's finally coming around. But I think it's different with the service industry - like the travel and dining business - because the service workers tend to be younger and they're generally more intimidated by men than they are women." She nodded her head in the direction of a clean table in the center now being occupied by two men. "If they had put us at that table, the men would have been seated over here, and they would have likely complained. I think the hostess was just trying to avoid that. It might be subconscious, or it might be policy, but we didn't complain, so it got reinforced."

"That makes me want to start paying attention to what we do at the hotel. I mean, if we do something like that, it isn't intentional. But we do go out of our way to address problems, and that usually means the complainer gets rewarded, like that man at the counter the night I checked you in. I'm really going to watch that from now on."

"It may just be that women really don't complain as much at the hotel. They know what it takes to clean a room and handle small details, and they're more willing to overlook lapses because some mistakes are easy to make."

"I'm going to start complaining," Paula announced sternly, pounding her fist lightly on the table. "But not tonight. Tonight, I'm just going to enjoy the company of my lovely companion."

Wynne smiled sincerely. "And I'm enjoying your company too." It was actually nice to have a dinner companion ask her what she thought about something, and really listen to her answer. With Paula, she felt as though she had a kindred spirit, one who saw her career as more than just a job and wanted to learn as much as she could to help her do it well. None of Wynne's friends or family could fill that bill. That was just another thing she liked about Paula. Okay, that, and the fact that she looked like a million dollars tonight.

All through dinner, the hotel manager told funny stories about things that had happened at the Weller Regent over the years, leaving the marketer in stitches at times. There were just so many things about Paula McKenzie that were appealing, Wynne thought as she eyed her companion. The woman was witty, mature, ambitious - so many things that Wynne found attractive, but had been unable to find in a lifetime of looking. Paula was also downright sexy.... "I'm sorry, say that again."

"I said I know a place near Disney where we can get a pretty good look at the fireworks display if you're interested."

"That would be fun," she readily agreed. "You know, Paula, I really am glad that we've had the chance to get to know each other. Honestly, I used to dread these trips, but having a chance to spend time with you has really changed all that." Wynne gave in to what she wanted, reaching across the table for Paula's hand.

Paula took it and smiled, very glad to see Wynne close the distance between them. "You have no idea how much I look forward to your visits. I tell you, sometimes it just makes me nuts to know that you're right there in my hotel and I can't...."

"Good evening, ladies." A distinguished gentleman and sharply dressed woman suddenly appeared beside their table, causing Wynne to immediately withdraw her hand.

"Mr. Markoff, hello," she stammered.

"It's Ken, and this is my wife Rachelle."

"Pleased to meet you. And this is my friend, Paula McKenzie."

Paula leaned forward to shake the couple's outstretched hands. From her days managing the business meetings at the hotel, she recognized the CEO of the company where Wynne worked.

"You look familiar, Miss McKenzie." Realization dawned and he went on, "I remember. You run things at the Weller Regent."

"Well, I don't exactly run things, but sometimes it feels that way," she joked.

"We've always been pleased with your hotel. Oh, and Wynne, Cheryl stopped in today to show me a few of the slides you two prepared. Great job!"

"Thank you."

"Ken, we should leave them to their dinner and get out of this aisle. It was very nice to meet you both," Rachelle offered sincerely.

"The pleasure was ours," Wynne answered, still in disbelief that her boss had walked upon her holding hands with her dinner companion. As they walked away, she quickly recovered. "Maybe we should settle the check and go."

"Of course." Paula knew what Wynne was thinking and she felt awful for her. She'd have reacted the same way had it been the CEO of her hotel chain at their table.

They hardly spoke again until they settled in the car.

"You want to talk about it?" Paula cajoled.

Wynne shook her head miserably. "No, there's nothing to say. It's not like I'm going to be working there much longer anyway. I just hope it doesn't affect my reference."

"You know, they didn't act surprised or put off by anything. In fact, I'd say they were perfectly casual about it."

"People practice that sort of thing. But it doesn't mean they don't walk away changed."

Paula sighed. She knew her friend was right. "Well there's nothing we can do about it now. Shall

we go see the fireworks?"

"Do you mind if we don't? I just feel sort of..." *deflated*, "unsettled about it. I don't think I'd be very good company."

"Sure," Paula agreed.

Both women were thinking that it was too bad an otherwise wonderful evening was ending on such a bad note.

## Chapter 8

Wynne Connelly had never been so disheartened in her life. Even as she lay immobile in a hospital bed after her accident, she knew that eventually she would recover from the worst of her injuries. All of her doctors had predicted that with a long and arduous rehabilitation, she would one day regain most of the function of her left leg; so she had never allowed herself to wallow in self-pity or defeat. At every temptation to do so, she'd remember that boy who died.

The wall clock in her small office at Gone Tomorrow Tours read 6:20, and the calm quiet from the cubicles outside her door told her that she was probably the only one still here. The days were longer now, but she'd grown accustomed to working well past dark.

Wynne turned over in her head the reasons for her discouragement, with two looming very large: her work and Paula McKenzie. Soon, she would likely be out of a job, a job she really liked. Even if her position got a reprieve, it was possible that she wouldn't be moved up the corporate ladder as long as Ken Markoff held the reins. She could potentially languish in mid-management her entire career. Perhaps it would be best if she was terminated after all, and forced to find something that held more promise.

Speaking of promise, Paula McKenzie was full of promise. Wynne had never met another woman who stirred her the way the pretty blonde hotel manager did, and if their kiss was any indication, the feeling was mutual. But Paula wasn't in the cards for Wynne, she knew. There were too many obstacles to overcome. So again, she reminded herself that she had nothing to offer but friendship.

Still, Wynne hated where they'd left things last week, not even making plans to see one another again because she had freaked out about Ken Markoff. The way she figured it, she had only two remaining trips to Orlando, and she wanted to have fun.

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Slayer eyed the distance carefully between the small dining table and the bar at the kitchen, where the woman who lived here at his house was making pictures on a screen by clicking her fingers across its base. If he could get closer, he might persuade her to stop for a moment and scratch his head.

*Thump!*

"Hi, sweet boy." Paula's right hand automatically rose to do his bidding, her left hand manipulating the mouse to log on to her internet connection. She had sent Wynne a cheery email last Thursday, hoping to ease the angst the woman obviously felt about what had happened at dinner the other night. So far, she'd received no reply.

Today, though, was different. Among her 11 new messages - including three that promised to make her penis longer and thicker - was a note from Wynne.

*Hi Paula,*

*I'm sorry to be so slow getting back to you. As usual, there is a lot to do when I return to Baltimore, and again when I'm preparing to leave. This is the lull between those times, when only a 10-hour workday is required.*

*I've confirmed with E-M that I have only two remaining trips to Orlando, this weekend and again two weeks later. If I'm invited to participate in the presentation of our plan, that will be in New York, but I'm not holding my breath.*

*So if you can overlook the fact that I became a total basket case the last time we went out, I'd love it if we could get together again next Tuesday. Since you mentioned the fireworks at Disney, I wonder if you'd be willing to consider an evening there. I sure hope so.*

*Wynne*

Paula reread the note several times, not just to understand what it said, but to come to terms with what it didn't say. Two more visits and that would be it. Obviously, Wynne wasn't thinking past her work here in Orlando. In fact, that kiss they'd shared seemed a long time ago, and Wynne hadn't made any kind of sign at all that she wanted to go there again.

Disappointment hung in the air as Paula shut down her computer. She had been nearly certain that things had clicked for Wynne just as they had for her, especially after their kiss. Her practical side said it was probably just as well - not much you can do with a girlfriend in Baltimore when you live a thousand miles away and work at a job that gives you Tuesdays and Saturdays off. But the impulsive side was frustrated. She had hoped that they might be able to work something out.

At the very least, though, she'd made a friend, perhaps even someone she would see again if Wynne held onto her job and made occasional trips to the company's headquarters. But the idea of having Wynne Connelly as a friend wasn't as comforting as she'd hoped it would be.

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Wynne settled into her favorite chair in the corner, balancing a small plate of peeled shrimp and fresh vegetables. The Sunshine State wasn't living up to its moniker and that would likely thwart her plans with Paula for an evening at Disneyworld, as the forecast for tomorrow was more rain.

Things had gone great at work today, where she and Cheryl finished the cost and revenue projections for all six scenarios of their marketing plan. They had only to rank-order their recommendations and finalize the slide presentation. On Wednesday afternoon, she and Cheryl would present them to Ken and Wendell, and Wynne would spend her final visit readying the presentation for the industry stock analysts.

"Nice day for ducks, huh?"

Wynne smiled at once at the sight of the pretty blonde. She'd been lost in her thoughts and hadn't seen the woman come in. "Hi, stranger. I was wondering if I'd see you tonight."

"Yeah, it's kind of quiet. I was hoping I'd find you here." Paula nearly melted at the sight of the warm smile. Maybe she'd read everything wrong after all.

"Thanks again for sending up that umbrella." Wynne found herself oddly nervous in Paula's presence.

"You're welcome. In fact, that's why I wanted to find you tonight. Not the umbrella, but the weather in general. We're supposed to get more of the same tomorrow, so Disney might not be a good idea."

"So what's Plan B?"

Paula hesitated while one of the hosts came to clear Wynne's plate. "You know, I like to cook,"

she said, keeping her voice low and trying her best to sound casual. "How would you like to come to my place for dinner?"

*No. I shouldn't do that.* "I'd love to. That sounds wonderful." God, this woman was irresistible.

"Great." *Oh yeah, read it all wrong.* All of a sudden, the electricity in the air was almost palpable. "So should I come pick you up at seven?"

"What if I got a taxi? Wouldn't that be easier? Then you wouldn't have to stop what you were doing to come get me." *And we're not seen together again.*

Paula nodded her agreement, drawing a pen and a business card from her pocket. Knowing that she'd already spent an inordinate amount of time talking with Wynne in the lounge, she hurriedly jotted down her address and home phone number. "Here you go. Come whenever you're ready."

"I can't wait." This would be fun, she thought, getting a glimpse of what Paula was like in her own home.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind a cat...although Slayer doesn't know he's a cat."

"Not at all, and I promise not to tell him." Wynne winked at that remark.

"Great. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

\*\*\*\*\*

Paula watched from the living room window as the beautiful brunette paid the cabbie and started slowly in the rain toward the cover of the steps. Immediately, she started out the door to offer a hand.

"Let me take that," she insisted, grabbing the umbrella as the tall woman struggled with the rail. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too. I've been looking forward to this all day." That was at least partly true. Another part of her had been anxious, again asking if it was the right thing to do.

"So have I. I hope you like chicken Marsala." Paula walked slowly with the woman as she persevered to the second floor landing.

"That sounds great. Paula, this is a lovely community," she said, turning back to take in the small lake, the tropical landscaping, and the neatly arranged condominium buildings.

"Thanks. There are developments like this all over Orlando. Each one is a little different, but the idea is the same. I like this one because the clubhouse has a nice fitness room and a pool, and there's a jogging trail around the golf course next door."

"It's also very nicely laid out. The places like this in Baltimore don't have all this pretty landscaping and the buildings are right on top of each other. I live in a townhouse, and we hardly have any of this common area, let alone something so pretty as a lake." Wynne was truly impressed with the complex.

"Well come on in. Let's see if you like the inside as much." Paula led her friend on a tour through the kitchen and living room, which were hard to miss as they entered through the front door. Since she was on the second floor, she had a cathedral ceiling with skylights in the living room and dining area. In the hallway was the door that led down to the garage, a guest bedroom and bath, and finally, the master suite with a larger bath and walk-in closet. "But here's my favorite room." Paula opened the door off the master bedroom that led onto the sun porch, where Slayer lay curled on a cushioned chaise lounge.

"Hi there, handsome," Wynne cooed, stretching out a hand slowly to pet the indifferent orange beast.

But after three strokes, he was fully on his back, now quite interested in these soft new hands that adored him so. This tall person could stay.

"I'd say you have a new friend."

"He's adorable," Wynne offered, still stroking the white belly as Slayer lay in near-hypnotic bliss.

"Let's see if you say that when he tries to eat off your plate. I won't even tell you some of the other adorable things he does." But when coaxed, Paula did share a few of the cat's more colorful exploits.

"Sounds to me like he's just doing his job," Wynne defended the cat, who had followed her back into the living room.

"Figures you'd take his side. You'd be singing a different tune if he dropped a squirming lizard in your bed!"

Wynne chuckled softly, still scratching her new furry friend. "I really like this place, Paula, everything about it. I bet you're really comfortable here."

"I am. I sort of wish I'd bought a three-bedroom so I'd have a little more room, but I don't get much company. My mom comes over from Cocoa once in a while, and my best friend stayed with me when her place got tented for termites."

As she talked, Paula poured them each a glass of cabernet sauvignon to enjoy with crackers and



cheese as their dinner simmered. Shaking her head in resignation, she watched as her guest shared the cheese with the now positively slutty Slayer.

The friendly cat was a welcome distraction for Wynne, who would otherwise have fumbled nervously for conversation. It was practically tormenting to be here in Paula's home, to witness her in such a casual, familiar way. The blonde was barefooted, dressed in faded jeans with a tightly fitted long-sleeved top that crept up her muscular midriff each time she moved. Wynne had never before been so aware of another woman's sensuality. Coming here was not a good idea, she now realized; but she didn't want to be anywhere else.

"Dinner should be ready," Paula announced. "Go ahead and have a -"

"Let me lend a hand," Wynne cut her off, following her host into the kitchen.

"Why don't you pour more wine? I have white on the top rack of the refrigerator if you want it."

"The red is fine with me. You want the other?"

"No, I'm fine too."

Together, they carried dinner to the table. Paula noticed as they ate that her guest gradually relaxed. She'd seemed nervous when she first arrived, almost standoffish. She wondered if that was the residue from Wynne's discomfort after running into her CEO. "So how are things going at work?"

Wynne talked about how their presentation was shaping up. "Cheryl walked through it today in her office with Martin and me. He's the assistant VP for operations. Tomorrow, she'll give it again to Ken and the guy who handles the analysts."

"What do you do next time?"

"Just wrap it all up, I guess. I suppose I'll work a couple of days with the human resources department to lay out how they might shift some of the talent around in the company. It would be a shame to lose some of these people just because their jobs are getting cut when there are others who are underperforming. I'm glad I don't have to make the final call on that one, though."

"Is your job really going to get cut?"

"Yeah, it looks that way," Wynne acknowledged.

"Do you think you'll be offered something else? I mean, surely, you're one of those people they'd hate to lose."

"I don't know, Paula," she said wistfully. "I'm not sure I want to move into just another slot. Eldon-Markoff's a great company, but one of these days, I'd like to sit in one of the big chairs, like Cheryl's. But she's only 47 years old, and she'll probably work at least another 15 years. I'd

like to move up before then, so I don't really see much chance of doing that here."

"Maybe you ought to think about the hotel industry," Paula suggested.

"Yeah, or one of the cruise lines, or even another travel company. I'm not limited to just tourism, but I feel like I know the market pretty well."

"I think whatever company hires you on is going to be awfully lucky."

"Thank you. Now, if you don't mind, can we talk about something a little less depressing? I'd hate to suddenly get the urge to slash my wrists with your cutlery!"

Paula chuckled at what she hoped was a joke. "Oh, no, I wouldn't let you do that." More seriously, she added, "I hope you get your dream job someday, Wynne. I know I haven't known you that long, but I happen to think you're a pretty special person."

Both women looked at each other quietly, slowly pushing their hands together as they had in the restaurant.

"And I think you're special, too." Wynne was mesmerized by the calm green eyes as she laced her fingers with Paula's. No one would walk by their table tonight. With a small tug, she urged the smaller woman forward, leaning slightly herself until their faces almost touched. "Very special," she whispered, closing the distance to lightly touch the waiting lips with her own.

Again, they looked at one another, this time with dancing eyes. That kiss was the affirmation that they were more than just friends. To Paula, it was a welcome signal, one that she needed; to Wynne, it was an alarm. After a long moment, the tall woman squeezed the hand and released it, finally breaking the spell.

"So would you like more?"

"No, I'm stuffed. It was wonderful."

"How about coffee or dessert? I have lemon sherbet with raspberry sauce."

"Maybe later." Wynne was nearly overwhelmed by the sensations that the tiny kiss had wrought. What she wanted next wasn't exactly on the menu.

Paula stood and picked up their plates. "Why don't you take your wine out to the porch and grab a chair. I'll be out in a minute." She knew that Wynne had a long day coming up tomorrow, but she dreaded the signal that it was time for her to leave. They had finally taken another step in the direction she wanted to go.

"Do you want some help?"

"No, I'm just going to set these in the sink and run some water on them."

Wynne started to do as she was directed, but the pull was too strong. She followed Paula to the kitchen, standing in the archway to watch the woman from behind. The sensations from earlier persisted, and before she knew it, she had crossed the tile floor to position herself directly behind the blonde as she stood at the sink. Automatically, her hands went to Paula's waist as she lowered her mouth to the bare neck.

Paula shuddered as the hot breath tickled her ear. When the lips began to caress the sinewy muscle, her head fell back against the taller woman's shoulder. She gasped as the long fingers slid underneath her top to stroke her stomach.

Wynne was lost. She had crossed the line, she knew, but found herself powerless to resist this woman. Her right hand left the confines of the shirt to cover Paula's breast, which she squeezed softly, but with confidence.

Paula turned, eager to have her own hands caress this beautiful woman. Their lips met fiercely, with a near animalistic fervor. Paula leaned back into the counter and pulled Wynne's hips closer, and soon both women were pushing against one another.

"We shouldn't...", Wynne murmured, burying her mouth in the soft flesh behind Paula's ear.

"We're both big girls, Wynne. We don't have to stop," Paula whispered boldly. Grasping the hand on her waist, she moved toward the door, flicking off the lights as they passed through the dining room. Moments later, they were standing together in the master bedroom, the queen-sized bed cast in a glow from the bedside lamp.

The voice that had plagued Wynne since the first moment she had met the beautiful blonde had finally relented. She was on her own. Hungry to know the treasures before her, she hooked both hands beneath Paula's top and lifted it smoothly over her head.

"Come lie with me," Paula urged, tugging the taller woman's hand to the bedside, where with one jerk of the arm, she sent the spread and the top sheet to the foot of the bed. Before they sat, she made quick work of the buttons on Wynne's silk top, pushing it off her shoulders as they tumbled downward.

Both women ran their hands over newly exposed skin as they locked again in a heated kiss. Wynne's hand slipped underneath to caress Paula's back and pull her impossibly closer.

Paula reached behind the broad back and loosened the clasp on the bra, pulling the straps over the shoulders. When Wynne rose even slightly, it would fall away. Unencumbered, her hands slid across the smooth plane.

"I want to feel you next to me," the dark-haired woman whispered, releasing the clasp of Paula's bra with a simple twist of her hand. As she lifted up, she pulled the smaller woman with her, leaning back as both removed their bras. Wynne suddenly stood and unfastened her slacks, sliding them off and tossing them over the bedside chair.

Paula eyed the beautiful woman standing before her in only a burgundy thong. If she'd ever been this aroused, it must have been in a previous life. Now matching Wynne's moves, she pushed off her jeans, which dropped crumpled on the floor. Her eyes never left the hungry blue ones that watched her as she slipped her panties off as well. Reaching out, she hooked the thong with her index finger and lowered it to reveal a closely trimmed triangle of jet black curls.

The thong now removed, Paula lay back on the bed in invitation, taking in the sight of the beautiful naked woman who towered above her. If there were ever a doubt as to which woman was the top here, it was surely answered now.

Wynne felt as though her whole body was on fire. The scent of their passion hung in the air as she lowered herself to completely cover the petite woman below. Instinctively, her hips settled on a muscled thigh and she hooked her hands underneath the smaller shoulders as the rhythmic dance began.

Paula stretched her arms but couldn't reach the buttocks to pull them closer. Instead, she raised her knee, feeling her new lover's damp center against her skin.

Wynne responded to the move by pulling back, drawing alongside the other woman. Burying her face into Paula's neck and shoulder, she raised a hand to stroke a breast, gently rolling the nipple between her thumb and forefinger.

Paula moaned at the tingling sensation, her hips writhing as she sought intimate contact with anything on her lover's body. "Please."

Wynne fought the urge to rush this encounter. That wasn't right for this, not for the way she felt about this woman beneath her. Lowering her mouth, she engulfed one breast while her fingers teased the other.

Pushing her fingers through the long dark hair, Paula pulled Wynne's head tightly to her as the woman devoured her breast. The sight of the mouth encircling her nipple made her want so much more.

"You're so beautiful," Wynne murmured as her fingers now traced the curve to Paula's hip. When her fingertips brushed the blonde curls, she was amazed to find them soft and fine, and she couldn't resist lingering there for longer than her partner could stand.

"Please, Wynne," came the desperate plea. "I need you to touch me."

Wynne's resolve to take things slowly crumbled as her fingers slipped through the warm wetness between her lover's legs. The woman beneath her cried out as she stroked two fingers inside and out, unrelenting as Paula's hips matched her rhythm. Wynne had been barely aware of the hand on her breast, but now her nipple was being pulled and pinched in tandem with her own movements. She wouldn't be able to take much more of this. With her thumb, she flicked the hardened clitoris until she felt the body underneath her grow still and rigid. "Come for me."

Paula exploded at the simple command, feeling herself tighten and pulse around the hand that filled her. Wynne's blue eyes were boring into her soul as she rode the wave, and she felt herself climbing again before she ever stilled. Clutching the tall woman's shoulders, she pushed her thigh between her lover's legs again, astounded at the wet heat she found. It was enough to tip her over the edge once again, and it was no surprise that Wynne soon followed.

The lovers lay motionless, both bodies throbbing from release. Suddenly conscious that her entire weight rested on the smaller woman, Wynne moved to pull away.

"No, stay another minute," Paula whispered her plea. The body that covered her gave her more than a physical sensation. The blonde woman had never felt this close to a lover; not to Shauna, not to Susan, women that she had loved. This connection with Wynne was as though they had known each other forever. "You feel so good."

Wynne answered her request with a deep kiss. She could still feel an occasional tremor from Paula's center as it gripped her fingers. Her lips traveled again to the smaller woman's neck and shoulder. "I could just devour you."

"Oh no, you don't. It's my turn now." In a fluid move, Paula reversed their positions, reluctantly sliding off Wynne's fingers. At once she covered the tortured nipple with her mouth, kissing, licking, nipping, and sucking. From the gasps and hisses, she knew that her touch was welcome. Now determined to have her mouth cover every inch of this beautiful woman, she left the breast and moved lower, stopping when she found a fading scar on Wynne's left side.

"What's this from?"

"They had to take out my spleen," Wynne explained with apprehension, suddenly self-conscious about the scars that covered her body.

Wynne needn't have worried, as Paula trailed her tongue along its length. As her lips traveled lower, she got a dizzying head full of her lover's luscious scent. When she reached the black triangle, she felt the thighs beneath her part in invitation. A shudder followed - whether hers or Wynne's she wasn't sure - as she finally dipped her tongue into the wet folds.

Wynne rarely revealed herself this way to anyone, not comfortable with being so exposed. But she didn't feel that vulnerability this time - she trusted Paula to share this intimacy. Reaching low, she grabbed the other woman's hand, squeezing hard as the sensations began to build.

Paula recognized the response of Wynne's hips and narrowed her focus to the swollen clitoris, sucking it gently but rhythmically between her lips.

"Oh God!" Wynne shut her eyes tightly as the powerful orgasm took her. When the waves receded, she bent forward at the waist, laying her hand on Paula's cheek. "Come up here."

Reluctantly, Paula left her treasure and moved up to claim another, covering Wynne's lips with

her own. "You're amazing...and so beautiful."

"You make me feel that way." The taller woman pulled her lover directly on top of her. "Will you let me taste you like that?"

"You can do anything you want with me."

## Chapter 9

Wynne resisted the temptation to flick her tongue into the sleeping woman's ear, knowing that it would trigger anew an exhausting round of lovemaking that would leave her shattered before her workday even began. For three hours last night, they had quietly explored one another, Paula finding and kissing all of the visible scars from her accident two years ago. What the blonde woman didn't know was that her touch had begun to heal the scars that couldn't be seen.

Slayer made himself comfortable draped across Wynne's hip, his paws resting on the arm that wrapped around Paula's waist. The cat had tactfully granted them many hours alone last night, but it was now time to assert his domain.

Daylight bled through the blinds, prompting the tall visitor to look about for a clock. Beside her lover's head, the green digital display read 5:36 a.m. She had persuaded Paula to set the alarm for six, but it wouldn't be needed after all. Carefully, she resituated the big orange cat beside his mom, and extricated herself from the covers. Scanning about, she gathered her clothes and found her way to the guest bathroom.

The face that greeted her from the mirror was oddly peaceful, given that she'd broken a major rule last night. But like Paula had said, they were both big girls, and she'd have to deal with it. She just couldn't muster enough guilt to feel regret.

Quickly, she washed and dressed, then slipped into the kitchen to use the phone. The card she'd gotten from the taxi driver came in handy after all, she mused.

"Paula? Wake up, hon." Wynne sat on the edge of the bed, gently shaking the sleeping woman's shoulder.

Paula heard the voice but wouldn't let her eyes open, afraid to lose the image of the beautiful woman beside her.

"Paula!"

"What is it? Wynne?" So she really had been here.

"I need to go soon. I called a taxi."

Paula twisted her body in the bed so she could wrap her arms around the woman's waist and lay her head in her lap. "Don't go. Last night was amazing," she mumbled, drifting off again.

"It was wonderful," Wynne agreed, meaning every word. "Paula? Did you go back to sleep?"

"No," the disheveled blonde protested, still without opening her eyes.

"Listen to me." Wynne lowered her voice. "I really must say, you throw a helluva dinner party."

Paula chuckled, finally sitting up.

"I have to go. Paula, last night was...it was just incredible. You are just incredible." It was in fact the most enjoyable night she had ever spent with another woman as far as Wynne was concerned, but she wasn't going to tell her that. She pulled the drowsy face to hers and delivered the kiss that finally awoke the sleeping beauty.

"You'll be back in two weeks?"

"I will," she promised.

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It took every ounce of concentration she could muster to stay focused on Cheryl's dynamic presentation of their recommendations. Ken Markoff and Wendell Martin were impressed with the logic and the many positive implications for their company's bottom line. The stockholders were going to love it.

All day, Wynne's thoughts had wandered back to the night before, to the images on Paula's face as she shuddered her release; of green eyes that locked onto her own as she lowered her mouth to Paula's most private place; and of the sleeping innocent in her arms. She remembered so vividly the taste....

"Okay, we're done here, gentlemen. Thank you for your comments. We'll make those two little revisions, and polish it up for the analysts," Cheryl finished.

"Cheryl, now is good for me if you have a few minutes," Ken said as he exited the conference

room to return to his office.

"I'll be right there," she called. "Wynne, what time is your plane?"

"It leaves at six. I suppose I should pack up my things and head out."

"Could you look into catching something a little later? I really need to talk with you, but I have to go over some things with Ken first."

Wynne's stomach knotted with anxiety. "I think there's another one around 8:30."

"Ask Denise to help you change it. I'll be happy to run you to the airport if we get pinched for time."

"Sure."

Wynne managed to get booked on the 8:30 flight, though she had to upgrade to first class for a guaranteed seat. Oh well, Cheryl had insisted. It was almost six o'clock before the vice president returned to her office. "Wynne, would you join us for a few minutes, then I promise to let you go."

The tall woman followed her boss back into Ken Markoff's office, her heart beating faster with every step. *This is about me.* They sure didn't waste any time once the plan was finished, she groused, readying herself for the axe.

At her boss's direction, she took a seat at a small round conference table directly across from the CEO. Cheryl sat down between them.

"Wynne, thank you for sticking around this afternoon," Markoff started formally. "I want to let you know personally that I really appreciate your contribution to this project. Cheryl has kept me up to date throughout the process, and has always spoken highly of your work. In fact, she told me what you'd said about working for what was best for the company and for the stockholders, and I have to say, that attitude is awfully impressive."

Wynne was starting to breathe a sigh of relief. It sounded like she was going to get a glowing recommendation from both Markoff and Cheryl Williams.

"Cheryl has been after me for a year to let her hire an assistant vice president who can manage the marketing aspects and let her concentrate more on the sales end, and we'd both like it very much if you'd accept that job. It will mean a move to Orlando, of course, but we'll pay for all that. And I hear that assistant VPs make a little more than managers, isn't that right, Cheryl?"

"It's about double, maybe a little more."

*Assistant vice president. Move to Orlando. Double the salary.* Here was the opportunity she'd wanted.



"So will you accept, Wynne?" Cheryl prodded.

"Of course I accept!" Wynne stood and extended her hand across the table to her CEO. "Thank you, Mr. Markoff."

"It's Ken, and welcome to the family."

"Cheryl, I don't know what to say."

The VP tossed out all formality and reached out to offer a warm hug. "I'm so glad to have you aboard, Wynne. It's going to be great working with you."

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It was almost midnight when the taxi pulled up in front of Wynne's townhouse, and she was dead on her feet. In the last 24 hours, her world had been totally rocked by the very things that had brought her so much frustration over the last few weeks.

It was time for Wynne Connelly to shed the sense of duty and obligation that had plagued her life for so long. At Eldon-Markoff, she was being offered a new start, a chance to build a career at one of the top companies in the travel business. What's more, Ken Markoff had apparently been okay with what he'd witnessed at the restaurant, so she wouldn't have to fear losing her job over being a lesbian.

Her move to Orlando would force her mother to take responsibility for her own well-being. That might be tough at first on Janelle, but Wynne felt strongly that both her sister and mom would rise to the occasion if they had to.

And then there was Paula.

As she'd more fully considered the ramifications of a move to Orlando, her thoughts of the beautiful blonde caused her sorrow to the point of a near physical pain. They were "big girls," Paula had said. Did that mean that they could handle the consequences of sleeping together, no matter what they were? Or did it just mean that they gave themselves permission to enjoy, without obligation? Whatever it meant, Wynne knew that by spending the night in Paula's bed, she'd probably ruined any chance to have a real future with the woman. It was one thing to have an out-of-town fling; it was altogether different to want to turn that into something more serious. Those types of relationships were based on mutual trust, and she'd violated that before they ever began. For that, she had regrets. Profound regrets.

But it was time to look forward now.

Wynne fumbled with her key, finally getting it to work. It was too late to worry about unpacking, she thought, so she left her bags in the foyer and started arduously up the stairs to the second level, a nightlight guiding her path.

From the top drawer of her dresser, she removed a nightshirt and went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. A hot soak would feel great, but she was far too tired for that. Instead, she took three ibuprofen, brushed her teeth, and turned out the light.

Wynne eased herself into bed, settling comfortably between the sheets. A warm arm snaked across her belly to pull her closer as a silky thigh nestled between her own.

"Did you have a good trip, sweetheart?"

"Just the usual." That would be her final lie, she vowed.

As Scooby-Doo would say: "Ruh-roh!" [Part 4](#)

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~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

**Part 4**

**Chapter 10**

"I was beginning to wonder if you were planning on coming home tonight." Heather Bennett met her lover at the door, taking both the black leather briefcase and the flannel-lined raincoat.

"Sorry, my inbox was stuffed. Dinner smells good."

"It was," Heather chided. "I saved you some."

"Thanks." Wynne didn't miss the admonition. Still, she had suggested long ago that Heather eat without her rather than wait when she was late getting home, especially since she had started working much longer hours with the Orlando project.

Together, the two women walked into the small kitchen, where Heather quickly went about warming dinner in the microwave.

"I can get that, Heather. You don't have to wait on me."

"I don't mind. Go ahead and have a seat."

Wynne did as she was told, sitting on a stool at the two-person counter while the other woman prepared her meal.

"Did you get a feel for what's going to happen to your job?"

"Yeah, I talked about it with Cheryl and Ken. I don't think they're going to let me go." That was technically the truth, but Wynne wasn't ready to share her news with her lover, especially now that she was on the precipice of making some big changes in her life. Heather Bennett would be one of those changes.

"That's great news, honey." The phone interrupted their chat. "Oh, your mom called...about three times."

Wynne sighed in resignation, not for her mother's call, but because once again, Heather had failed to simply suggest that her mother try the work number. It was no secret that her lover was jealous of the time she gave to her family. Heather barely spoke to the Connelly woman, and vice versa; in her mind, Wynne's constant catering to her mother took her away from what should be her primary relationship.

"Hello... Yeah, I just walked in the door. Heather told me you'd called," Wynne covered for her lover's indifference. "That's a good idea, Mom, but I think you ought to get more than one estimate. That seems like a lot of money." On her daughter's recommendation, Kitty Connelly had decided to have the exterior of her Tudor home painted. "Sure, I'll come on Saturday and meet with them."

Heather slammed her glass down on the counter to express her anger at Wynne's easy acquiescence, and left the room in disgust.

"Okay, I'll see you about 10:30. Bye."

Wynne knew that her lover was steamed, but she just didn't have the energy to deal with it.

Besides, it would never be resolved to Heather's satisfaction - that would require Wynne to sever all contact with her mother and sister - so why bother at all.

The microwave beeped and the tired woman retrieved her meal, a bowl of chicken stew. Briefly, she considered following Heather into the living room where the other woman no doubt was already absorbed in something on TV, but Wynne didn't want to deal with either the noise or her lover's foul mood. Not tonight...not again.

It was two years ago that Wynne met the stylish young woman during a party at the home of mutual friends. As the only single women in attendance, the pair was given a wide berth when they settled on a corner sofa and got to know a little about each other. Only 24 years old, Heather Bennett was pretty, average height with long curly brown hair and large hazel eyes. Her hours at the gym were apparent from her trim figure. A sales clerk for women's clothing and accessories at an upscale department store in Owings Mills, she planned a career in retail, hoping someday to make department head. Without a college degree, she doubted she could move into management.

Despite her initial reservations that Heather really wasn't her type, she accepted an invitation to have dinner with her the following week. As far as Wynne was concerned, their date was mediocre at best, so she was surprised the next day when one dozen long-stemmed red roses arrived at her office, along with another invitation to go out. The flowers must have set Heather back a day's pay!

That weekend, they took in a movie, afterward sharing a small kiss that for Wynne lacked any sort of spark at all. Certain that they had no future, the taller woman decided not to pursue a deeper relationship with Heather Bennett.

Fate changed that when, after dropping Heather off at her home, Wynne was broadsided at an intersection by a pickup that was traveling so fast it pushed her more than half a block before she came to rest against a utility pole. Rescue workers used the "jaws of life" to extract her unconscious body from the crushed Toyota Camry, but not before she writhed in agony for over an hour, staring through the shattered window at the lifeless face of the youth who had hit her. It was an image that to this day plagued the woman's dreams.

When she regained consciousness four days later, Heather was at her side, Kitty Connelly having shared the bedside vigil with this young woman who seemed to care so much for her daughter. Wynne was a mess, her left leg shattered, her skull fractured, her ribs and pelvis snapped. A ruptured spleen had nearly caused her to bleed to death in the crumpled car. She was lucky to be alive.

It was eight weeks before she was released from the hospital, and only then under 24-hour care. Heather took a leave of absence from her job and moved into Wynne's two-story townhouse, taking charge of the woman's day to day care.

When the physical therapy sessions started, it was Heather who consulted with the therapist so that she could help Wynne at home; and it was Heather who encouraged the injured woman to push through the pain to rebuild the strength and stamina she had lost. Looking back, it was hard

for Wynne to imagine how she ever would have recovered without the woman's dedicated help.

Three months after the accident, Heather returned to work, but continued to spearhead the physical therapy sessions, adjusting her schedule so that she could drive the patient back and forth. Even as she worked full-time, she managed to see to Wynne's every need, cooking, bathing, keeping house. During these months of recovery, Wynne could see clearly the growing devotion and affection in this woman who had come to be such an integral part of her rehabilitation. In truth, she sometimes felt smothered by Heather's attentions.

The marketer returned to work after four months, part-time at first, but gradually resuming her heavy workload. Two more minor surgeries on her leg sidelined her for a while, but with Heather's dependable help, her rehab continued until all that remained was her nagging limp and the predictable soreness from her not-yet-mended femur.

At the eight-month mark, Heather poured out her heart to the recovering woman, confessing that she had fallen deeply in love. The lease was up on her apartment, and she needed either to sign another or to move out. That forced a decision Wynne really wasn't ready to make.

Though she still felt no spark between them, she had grown to care for the younger woman, and to value the friendship they had forged from endless hours of conversation and very personal care. Heather had certainly seen her at her worst, and at 33 years old, Wynne doubted that anyone else would ever show her such devotion. Reservations notwithstanding, the women became lovers.

Almost immediately, she knew that it had been a mistake to move their relationship to a more intimate level. Their lovemaking was passionless, and something Wynne never initiated. There were times that she would nearly cry in frustration at her inability to climax, no matter what they did. She hated herself for the deception, but faking orgasms in order to end their lovemaking had become the standard.

After only six months together as lovers, Wynne had tried to talk to Heather, hoping that she might be willing to return things between them to a platonic level. But Heather had persuaded her to give it more time; that things would get better between them when Wynne put her injury behind her.

Wynne couldn't forget that this woman had practically given up her own needs and concerns to invest in her return to health, and such a sacrifice wasn't to be taken lightly. Besides, when their relationship moved to lovers, Heather had given up her own home and much of her second-hand furniture, and now had no place to go.

In the last few months, things between the women had taken a turn for the worse, or at least they had for Wynne. Heather was estranged from her parents and had little patience for the way her lover catered to her mother's needs. The more Kitty Connelly called on Wynne, the more Heather resented it, now to the point that she objected each time Kitty asked for help with something, or even whenever she wanted to stop by the townhouse. Wynne managed the strain by keeping the parties apart, but the stress of putting up with Heather's disapproval was wearing on her nerves.

Add to that Wynne's own depression at the realization of the true foundation of their relationship: obligation. Simply put, Wynne had owed the woman too much to deny her what she asked. But she would never love Heather in a romantic way, nor would she ever feel sexual attraction.

"Why don't you come watch *Friends* with me?" the younger woman called from the living room.

Wynne rinsed her bowl and placed it in the dishwasher. "I'm going up to bed. I'm really tired."

"Yeah, what was with that late flight last night?"

"Just a late meeting. I missed the earlier flight."

"Why don't you come sit with me and I'll rub your neck?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll soak in the tub for awhile then go on to bed." Without waiting for a reply, Wynne labored up the staircase to the second floor. Ten minutes later, she was lowering herself in a steaming bubble bath when her lover appeared in the doorway.

"Got room for me in there?"

Wynne couldn't hide her grimace at the intimate suggestion. "I'm tired, Heather. I just want to soak a while until my leg feels better then get some sleep."

The younger woman's shoulders slumped at the rejection. "I'm just trying to meet you halfway, Wynne. I know you hate the TV so I turned it off. What else would you have me do?"

The exhausted woman didn't want to play this game. "I just want to rest. I don't care if you want to watch TV."

"You act like you don't care what I do at all. You've barely said hello since you got back last night. Why is it so hard to accept that I might want to spend a little time with you tonight? You've been away from me for the last four days. Surely you don't need more time to yourself."

That's exactly what she needed, Wynne thought. "Heather, look...I'm sorry but my leg is sore and I'm tired. I have another long day tomorrow and I need to be ready for it."

"Yeah, and I heard you're not going to be around on Saturday either." Now angry, Heather shut the door loudly in retreat, leaving the tall woman to sigh deeply and slip lower into the mass of bubbles.

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"What do you mean moving?" Janelle's brown eyes were wide with panic.

"Shhhh! I haven't told Mom yet." Wynne guided her younger sister into the study and shut the door. "Janelle, this is an opportunity I've wanted for a long time. It's always been my dream to achieve something like this at work. You know that. I have to take it."

"Wynne, who's going to take care things for Mom? I can't handle that. I've already got enough on my plate with school and Sophie," the younger sister pleaded frantically.

"Janelle, it isn't my responsibility to take care of Mom. She's a grown woman. She should start taking care of herself. Maybe she'll do that if I'm not here to handle every little problem."

"Now you sound like Heather."

*Ouch!* The truth of that was inescapable.

"I bet she's thrilled with all of this. Now she gets you all to herself," Janelle grouched.

"I haven't told her about the job yet. I...I'm not going to ask her to come with me."

"What!"

"I just think this is a good time to end things. We're just not...all that good together."

"I can't imagine Miss Congeniality would be good with anybody."

"Janelle, that's not fair. Heather was very kind to me when I really needed it. I don't know how I'd ever have made it through all that without her help."

"I can answer that, Wynne. Mom and I would have been there for you and you know it. Maybe if you had given Mom a chance, she would have figured out that she wasn't so helpless after all."

"I wasn't exactly in a position to make decisions for myself, was I?"

"No, but when you did get better, you let that woman take over your life," Janelle complained. "Do you have any idea how many times Heather told us not to come by because you were resting, or because you needed to focus on your therapy, or because the two of you were...busy, whatever busy meant."

Wynne's face reddened at the obvious sexual innuendo. She hated to think that Heather would have given away the privacy of that aspect of their life. Her mother had had enough difficulty with the prospect of her oldest daughter being gay without having it thrown in her face.

"Mommy!" The little voice came from beyond the door, the child obviously scurrying from room to room in her search.

"In here, sweetie." Janelle opened the study door to welcome her daughter.

Wynne was grateful for the diversion, her head spinning from her sister's reaction to the news. If Janelle was this bad, how was her mother going to take all this? And worse, how would she deal with Heather?

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"So have you seen The Beautiful Woman from Baltimore?" That's the name Val had assigned her friend's new romantic interest.

"Yeah, she came over for dinner Tuesday night." Paula wasn't sure she was ready to share the details of her night with Wynne Connelly. She could hardly believe it herself - they had spent a wonderful...erotic...passion-filled night together and had seemed to connect at every turn.

"How many more visits does she have?" Both women stood before the mirror doing curls.

"Just one for sure. If they keep her on, I guess she'll get a chance to come down every now and then."

"I take it that means you two aren't going to pursue anything serious." Val traded the 10-pound dumbbell for one twice that heavy, this time to stretch the long muscles along her shoulder and neck.

Her friend's question prompted a surprising rush of feelings - none of them very comforting. "I don't know. I guess realistically, the answer is no. But if there was a way we could work it out, I'd be willing to give it a try."

"How do you think she feels?"

"I'm not sure." Paula was pretty certain that Wynne had feelings for her, but the scope of those feelings was unclear. There was definitely something there, but outside of the utterances that poured forth during the heat of their passion, neither woman had said much of anything beyond letting the other know she was special.

"So maybe next week you should raise a stakes a little," Val suggested mischievously. "You know, soft music, candlelight...a little massage oil."

Paula blushed, now feeling guilty at holding out on her friend. She was dying to talk to somebody, and Val was really the only one she could safely say anything to. "We uh, already sort of did that."



"What!" The bar manager looked at her with both shock and thrill. "You mean you two already...?" Val made a little finger through the circle motion with her hands.

"You're so crude," she said, feigning disgust. "But yes, we...," Paula mimicked the gesture, adding, "...among other things."

On that note, Val now sported a small blush of her own. "Careful there, not too much information."

"You're the one that asked."

"So the two of you had sex and you still don't know how she feels?"

Paula found herself a little embarrassed at her friend's frank implication, but there was really no dodging it. "I don't know how to explain it. It feels like there's something there, but it's like we both know that a real relationship probably isn't feasible, so we just sort of...took a shortcut. I know she likes me. But the sex thing just happened. It really wasn't about expressing any feelings." At least it probably wasn't about feelings as far as Wynne was concerned. Paula noted the look of doubt on her friend's face. "Don't you just sometimes get...carried away with somebody who's really hot?"

"Maybe once...or twice," she conceded. "So how was it?"

Paula returned the dumbbells to the rack, contemplating her response. "I think I'm ruined for anyone else."

"Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh is right."

## **Chapter 11**

The marketing manager was glad to be back at her desk on Monday morning. She had planned on talking with her mother on Saturday afternoon and with Heather on Sunday, but after Janelle's response, she lost her nerve. Things were so tense at home yesterday that she and Heather had barely spoken.

Cheryl Williams had obviously been working over the weekend, Wynne noted, as her email box was filled with a series of messages on the new job and the upcoming presentation.

*CWilliams Presentation - final copy*

Wynne downloaded this one to study later.

*CWilliams New York*

This was an unexpected but very welcome invitation to come to New York with Ken, Cheryl, and Wendell for the presentation to the stock analysts in three weeks.

*CWilliams Contract*

This time, Wynne went straight to the downloaded document. It was a detailed job description, packed with the kinds of tasks in which the marketer reveled. The new job would require travel, estimated at once or twice a month at first, perhaps more later as Eldon-Markoff expanded or acquired new companies.

In addition to the contract was a draft of the official offer, which almost took her breath away: Her new base salary would be \$126,000. She was eligible for an annual bonus worth up to half her salary if corporate and department goals were met, and she would also receive stock options each year.

Eldon-Markoff would pay all of her moving expenses, including real estate commissions and closing costs. She was expected to start full time in Orlando six weeks from today.

That last part lit a fire under her. She needed to contact a real estate agent to put her townhouse on the market, so she'd have to talk to Heather soon. Tonight...she would talk to Heather tonight.

*PMcKenzie Your next visit*

A knot formed in Wynne's stomach as she hovered the mouse over the subject line. There hadn't been a waking hour in the week since she'd been home that she hadn't thought at least once about Paula McKenzie and the exciting things they'd done, or the wonderful things she'd felt. Each time, the guilt grabbed her and pulled her back down to earth.

*Hi Wynne,*

*Well, this is my usual mid-week note - you know, the one where I say that I had a great time seeing you on your last visit and that I hope we can get together again next time to do something fun. The words are certainly true again, but somehow they just don't seem to say enough this time.*

*I don't really know how to say this, so I'll just blurt it out. I'm really looking forward to seeing you again, but I don't want to be presumptuous. I'm open for anything you'd like to do.*

*Paula*

Wynne felt the tears well up, deeply sad that she'd just played it all wrong. In six weeks, she'd be moving to Orlando...single. Paula was someone she might have had a future with had she not gotten carried away last week. If she'd kept her distance and told the truth, things may have worked out; but hiding the truth about Heather at this point was out of the question. As it was, she didn't deserve to have something that nice after all.

Her best bet was to come clean and try to salvage a friendship; maybe in time, they could start over. But she couldn't deal with it before talking to Heather. She had to start putting things in order.

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Paula clipped her nametag above the pocket of her navy suit and stepped into her shoes. Careful not to collect the orange cat's pervasive fur, she stretched her fingers out to scratch behind his ears.

"You be a good boy, and don't answer the door or the phone." As if on cue, the phone rang at that moment. "I'll get that."

Slayer turned around in circles several times before settling in his favorite chair, which also happened to be Paula's favorite chair.

"Hello...oh, hi Dad!" It was rare for Ray McKenzie to call his daughter, since he was at work when she was at home and vice versa. "What's up? Is everything okay?" Paula brushed a lint roller along her skirt as she talked. "Oh, right! Would it be alright if I brought a friend? I know, you need a full name and social security number." The shuttle Discovery was launching on Saturday morning and her father was offering a pass to the press site. "Can I let you know tomorrow? I'll call you...thanks Dad. Bye."

This was good. Now she had an excuse to call the woman from Baltimore, and that would ease any awkwardness either might feel about their intimate encounter. But the business card Wynne had given her was in her desk drawer at the WR, so she'd have to call from there.

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"You look awful, Jolene." Paula took in the sight of her red-eyed desk clerk. The African-American woman shone with sweat, clearly the product of a fever. "You should go on home."

"I hate to leave you to do this by yourself." Matthew had called in sick tonight as well, so Paula and Rusty would have to man the front desk. It wouldn't be so bad if they took turns, since they weren't expecting a lot of new arrivals tonight.

"I'll be alright. It'll be like the old days, when I was young and carefree," Paula joked. "Go on. Go home and take something and fall into bed. And if you still have a fever in the morning, call in and ask them to schedule someone else."

"Thanks, Paula."

"Take care of yourself." The manager immediately took over the front desk duties, which consisted mostly of answering the phone and checking in the occasional guest.

It was 7:30 before she remembered her father's invitation. Pulling up the database, she quickly found Wynne's record, which listed an Orlando number for work, and a Baltimore number for home. She could call Rusty down and run up to her desk to retrieve the other work number, but at this hour it wasn't likely she was there anyway.

Paula warred within herself about what to do. On the one hand, it was technically an abuse of her access to information to look up a home phone number for personal reasons. On the other hand, she and Wynne had slept together and you couldn't get much more personal than that! And if there was a chance that Wynne could make it down for a launch at the press site, she'd probably really be sorry she missed it just because Paula thought it improper to call her at home.

Using her cell phone, she placed the call. After four rings, she was mentally preparing to leave a callback message, when an unfamiliar female voice picked up.

*"Hello."*

Momentarily startled, Paula debated for a split second about hanging up. "Uh, hi. May I please speak to Wynne Connelly?"

*"I'm sorry, she isn't home yet. I'd be happy to take a message."*

A message...should she leave a message? "Sure...would you tell her that Paula called?"

*"Of course. And can she reach you at...?"* Heather read back the number on the caller ID.

"Yes."

*"I'll give her the message as soon as she gets home."*

"Thank you."

Paula was surprised to find herself shaking. Who was the woman who had answered the phone? Wynne had told her about a sister, but she hadn't said that they lived together. She had never mentioned a roommate. A sick feeling crept into her gut.

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The marketing manager fumbled for her front door key, dreading the night ahead. She had dragged out her workday, even buying a dinner of snack crackers and soda from the vending machine to postpone the imminent conversation with Heather. It was nearly eight o'clock when she entered her home.

"Boy, you really must have a mountain of work to stay there so late," Heather said in greeting.

"Yeah, but I'm making progress." Wynne tried to smile. This was going to be a difficult night, and it wouldn't do to let it escalate to a confrontation. Still, she knew she couldn't simply will away her lover's emotional response.

"Somebody from Orlando called about a half hour ago. I guess they all work late down there too."

"Was it Cheryl?" She had called her boss about an hour earlier to suggest one last change in the

presentation.

"No, she said her name was Paula. She left a number."

The tall woman felt her chest constrict as the anxiety rose inside her. So Paula had called her at home and now knew about Heather.

"I'll...call her tomorrow. It's late."

"Well, it was only a half hour ago. I started to tell her just to call you at work. What are you guys working on?" Heather wasn't really interested in the nuts and bolts of Wynne's job, but she wanted her partner to succeed and she was willing to support that however she could.

"Sort of a reorganization. Why don't I put this away and we can talk about it." That was the segue she needed.

"Or we can talk about something else if you'd rather not think about work any more. You want something to eat?"

"No, I had a bite at my desk. I'm not really hungry. And I really do need to talk to you about things at work." She noted just the barest hint of a shake in her voice, and hoped she could keep it from getting worse. If Heather picked up on anything that suggested weakness or a lack of resolve, she'd be all over it.

Wynne hung her coat in the closet and stowed her briefcase. Heather had taken a seat on the couch in the living room, muting the TV. Wynne walked in front of the set and turned it off, taking a chair on the other side of the small room.

"What is it, honey?"

Wynne leaned forward and folded her hands, willing herself to look the other woman in the eye. Slowly, she began. "This is going to be a tough conversation, Heather."

The hazel-eyed woman shifted uncomfortably on the couch, not yet understanding what the reorganization at Eldon-Markoff had to do with her. She'd always been accommodating when it came to Wynne's work.

"Heather, I...don't think it's much of a secret that you and I haven't been connecting very well lately. In fact, it's been like this for a long time, at least for me."

"Well, you've been working long hours lately, and you've been gone a lot. I'm sure things will smooth out when things calm down at work," she offered nervously.

"I'm not as sure about that as you. I've been thinking - for quite a while, actually - that maybe we should...move on. I look back over the last couple of years, and I can honestly say that I have never felt more loved by anyone, and that I owe you more than I can ever repay for all the things

you did for me after my accident." It was taking everything Wynne had to keep her voice and gaze steady as she said her piece, taking in the stunned look on the younger woman's face.

"Don't do this, Wynne."

The brunette shook her head in resignation. "But I can't be what you need... what you deserve. I've tried, Heather, for over a year, and I just can't do it."

"In other words, you don't love me like I love you," Heather said sharply.

Wynne sighed deeply and leaned back in the chair. Her lover's summation was cold, but accurate. "I'm sorry."

Tears started to pool in the woman's hazel eyes, and her voice grew small. "You know, Wynne, maybe we could get away together and take some time to enjoy each other. I don't... want to just throw away two years without feeling like we tried to fix it."

"Heather, it's not - how do I explain this? - it's not like anything is broken. It's that it never really fit to begin with. We had a wonderful friendship, but it was a mistake on my part to try to make more of it than that, because my love for you was never the deep, passionate love that both of us deserve to feel. I've really tried to love you that way, but I just can't."

"So the whole last year has been a lie for you. Is that what you're saying?" The tone of Heather's voice had taken on an edge.

"I haven't intentionally misled you, Heather. But I can't manufacture the feelings you need."

"Why do you keep talking about what I need and what I deserve?" she wailed accusatorily. "I have what I need. I'm happy with you."

"But I'm not."

"So now that you're all better, you're just going to toss me out like yesterday's trash? I gave up my home, Wynne. And I got rid of nearly all of my stuff because there wasn't room for it here. What am I supposed to do now?"

"I'll... help you with whatever you need. You can take some of the stuff from here... some furniture, some linens, some dishes, whatever you need," she repeated. The older woman recalled that most of Heather's furniture was second-hand, and she had said that many of her dishes and linens were mismatched sets, hand-me-downs from her family and friends. "Early attic," she had jokingly called the décor. Wynne was willing to part with almost anything in her house - not her grandmother's china or the antique brass bed - but as far as she was concerned, Heather could have the rest of it if she wanted it.

"Can we please give this some time, Wynne?"

"Heather, I'm taking a new job in Orlando. It starts in six weeks, so I need to put the house on the market this week."

"So you're moving to Orlando. That's what this is about."

"No. It's about us, and the fact that this isn't working for me. I wasn't about to uproot you from your job and your friends when I knew in my heart that we weren't going to make it."

The two women sat quietly for long minutes before Heather finally stood. "I can't talk about this any more. I'm going for a drive."

"Heather, please. You shouldn't drive if you're upset," Wynne pleaded. "I'll...go over to Mom's if you need to be by yourself."

"In other words, you're not too upset to drive, right?" The cork that had held the young woman's emotions in check up to now had come undone. "And the reason you're not upset, Wynne, is because you've gotten everything you've needed from me. And now that you don't need anything else, you're moving on. It doesn't matter to you that I still need you."

"Knowing that I'm hurting you does upset me, and I'm so sorry. But it would be wrong of me to let you give up even more for me feeling the way I do about our future."

"What, did you get a promotion?"

"Yes," Wynne answered simply.

"So now you have a fancy job at corporate, and I'm not the right accessory. Is that it? Don't tell me, let me guess: They don't even know you're gay, I bet."

Actually, Ken Markoff probably did, Wynne realized, but she certainly wasn't about to volunteer that and have to explain how he came to know. "It's not about that at all, Heather. I don't know what they know, but I don't intend to live my life in the closet. And I would never consider a partner as an accessory to my work. Both of us deserve better than that."

"Don't keep patronizing me with your opinion about what I deserve," Heather hissed, angry tears streaming down her face as she grabbed her purse and stormed toward the door. "I'll get out of here as soon as I can. Believe me, now that I know how you really feel about me, I don't want to be here any more than you want me here."

Wynne winced as the door slammed and rattled the pictures on the walls. It was about as ugly a scene as she had imagined it would be, but all she felt right now was relief that it was over. She knew that it was only Round One, as Heather would be back, and would probably make a calmer plea for her to rethink her decision. Wynne had given no ground thus far, but her lover - check that, ex-lover - would no doubt increase the pressure for her to relent.

Saddened that things would be ending on such a hurtful note, Wynne resolved to try to make the



transition as friendly and peaceful as possible. She had a healthy savings account and would gladly help Heather get set up in a new place. It would probably be difficult for them for a while, but surely their friendship was solid enough to weather this. As long as she had family in Baltimore, Wynne knew she would be coming back to visit. It would be nice to think that she and Heather could salvage something from their time together.

Walking into the kitchen for a bottle of water, Wynne saw the note on the counter, the number for Paula. A new wave of nausea passed through her as she folded the paper and stuffed it in the pocket of her skirt, doubting seriously that she would call back. What would she say? Paula had the whole picture now.

## **Chapter 12**

"I'm going to do my hall inspection," Paula said as Rusty settled into his chair to begin his Sunday night paperwork routine. She didn't want to watch the video this week, knowing that her boss would likely comment on the fact that the dark-haired woman from Baltimore hadn't checked in tonight. She had monitored reservations all week, noting that K. Wynne Connelly was not among their expected guests.

Wynne had neither answered her email nor returned her call. In fact, she hadn't heard one word from the woman since the morning they had kissed goodbye in her bed. Though she didn't want to accept it, she knew that she had stumbled onto Wynne's little secret - the woman from Baltimore was unavailable.

She had to laugh at herself for all the time she had spent worrying about the fact that it would be hard to overcome living in two different cities. To think that she had even found herself perusing the job listings in the DC area, only a few miles from Baltimore!

Paula acknowledged to herself that she'd been played for a fool. She wanted to be angry, but right now she felt only sorrow, hurt and embarrassment. How could she have misjudged the connection she'd had with Wynne when it had seemed so strong?

When she reached the Concierge Floor, she inspected the dessert display and proceeded to the small office area that linked the lounge with a service elevator. Rummaging through the bottom desk drawer she located a telephone directory.

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"Hello."

*"So...did the Hyatt give you a better rate?"*

It took only a split second for the voice on the phone to register. "Paula. I...I wanted to call you, but I just didn't know what to say," she explained sadly.

*"Well, for starters, why don't you tell me how we got this far apart in just 12 days?"*

"I...," *I what?* "I haven't been honest with you. I..."

*"Yeah, I got that part when another woman answered your phone."*

"Paula, I didn't mean for you to find out that way."

*"I'd say you didn't mean for me to find out at all. But it doesn't matter, Wynne. I was just calling to tell you that I'm sorry if I led you into something you didn't mean to do."*

Wynne stared at the phone in her hand as the line went dead.

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The agent pulled into a wooded cul de sac, stopping at the last house before the circle. Cheryl Williams had canceled Wynne's meetings for the afternoon, hooking the young executive up with a realtor who would show her properties in some of Orlando's best neighborhoods.

"This is my favorite of the houses we'll see today," she remarked. "It's four bedrooms, three and a half baths, a formal living room and dining room, an eat-in kitchen, and a screened-in patio." The house - an older Spanish-style bungalow, white with a red tile roof - definitely had curb appeal. The best part for Wynne was that it was a single story.

"This is very nice, but it's really more than I need," the tall woman said when they'd finished the tour. It would cost her thirty thousand dollars to furnish a place this large. Heather had taken her up on her offer and laid claim to the living room furniture, entertainment center, and the suite in the guest bedroom, where she'd been sleeping for the past week.

"Maybe it seems that way now, but things can change. It's a great house for children, and in a top school district."

Wynne was accustomed to such assumptions from others. To refute it would be to invite a stranger into her personal matters and she wasn't about to do that. On the other hand, one of the bedrooms would make a nice office and it would be nice to have two spares if the Connelly women came to visit.

They had done the paperwork before leaving the realty office, so both women knew that Wynne could afford this house if she wanted it. She also had a loan letter in hand from Eldon-Markoff, guaranteeing the purchase of her house in Baltimore, so the contingency wouldn't be a problem.

This house was the most expensive of the ones she'd seen, but it was head and shoulders above the rest, in that it was turn-key and in an older established neighborhood. And it wasn't far, she noted, from that nice condominium community where Paula lived.

"Okay, let's do it."

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"You're in early," Stephanie remarked. Stephanie Anderson was the director of the Weller Regent, the hotel's top dog. She was a vibrant woman of 57, and a good administrator. In her 30-plus years with Weller Regent, Stephanie had mentored scores of people, many of whom had gone on to manage their own hotels or to work in the company's New York headquarters. Paula McKenzie had always been one of her favorites.

"Yeah, I'm...uh...."

"Looking at the job openings?"

Paula was stunned at the woman's perceptive abilities. "How did you know?"

"Actually, it was just a guess, but thank you for confirming it." The woman grinned wryly as she pulled up a chair next to Paula's at the computer. "Did you see the job in Denver?"

Paula nodded. Their newest hotel was looking to hire a Senior Shift Manager, the equivalent of Rusty's position. It was a plum job in the system, and would probably go to someone with more seniority than she.

"I think you'd be perfect for it. Mind you, I wouldn't be excited about losing one of the best managers I've ever had working for me, but I'd like to see you venture out of Orlando and earn your wings. I'm not going anywhere for a few more years, but when I do it would be nice if you had some senior management experience under your belt."

Paula was awed by the praise. Stephanie was practically telling her that she had a chance to succeed her in a few years at this hotel, but only if she seized the opportunity now to gain experience at an advanced level.

"Do you really think I'd have a shot at this job in Denver?"

"I think you're a shoe-in."

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The next three weeks were a blur for Wynne, traveling to New York with the folks from Eldon-Markoff, selling the townhouse, closing on the home in Orlando, and managing the move. Heather had found a very nice one-bedroom apartment near the mall where she worked, and Wynne had given her a rather large check to help her with deposits and some of the new things she would need. In one of her more ugly moments, Heather had called it "guilt money," but otherwise the tension at home had lessened noticeably. On their last day together, the two women held one another for a long tearful moment, each wishing the best for the other.

The bleary-eyed woman felt around in the unfamiliar environs and slapped the alarm. The green digital display read 4:30 a.m. Lying in the strange bed, Wynne grew more and more cognizant of her surroundings and the reason she was staying here.

What was left of her belongings, including her car, was headed into storage for a couple of weeks. For the time being, she was at her mother's house, readying for the fourth and hopefully final surgery on her battered leg.

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"I appreciate this."

"It's no big deal," Val answered her friend. She was dropping Paula at the airport for her flight to Denver. "Are you nervous?"

"A little. It's been a long time since I interviewed for a job, but Stephanie grilled me yesterday for about two hours. I think I'm ready."

Val signaled for the exit off the Beeline Expressway. "You know, there's a selfish part of me that hopes you fall on your face."

"I know, Val." Paula placed her hand on her friend's shoulder. "There's a part of me that hopes I do too...for all the same reasons."

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The pain was excruciating, but Wynne knew it would eventually lessen on its own. The painkillers gave her the strangest dreams, including horrible flashbacks to the accident that had led to this and the other surgeries. From the corner of her eye, she could see Kitty Connelly dozing in a bedside chair, an open magazine spread across her chest.

Her mom had actually taken the news about her move to Orlando surprisingly well, thanks to the ingenious way Janelle had thought of to break it.

*"They're moving you to Orlando?" The elder Connelly woman was alarmed at the prospect of not having her oldest daughter close by to take care of emergencies. And it seemed there were so many more emergencies these days.*

*"That's right. Assistant vice president, and they're doubling my salary, paying for the move, everything. I really wish Dad could have been here to see this. He knew how much something like this would mean to me."*

*Kitty Connelly had always deferred to her husband's opinion, and if he'd have liked this, she would like it too.*

*"I wish he could be here too. He'd be so proud, just like I am."*

And when Wynne mentioned that she was planning to have the final surgery before the new job started, her mother had insisted on taking care of her, especially since Heather had now moved out. Furthermore, she would accompany Wynne to Florida to help her get set up in her new house.

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Vince Tolliver couldn't believe his luck. Across from him sat the fourth applicant for the senior manager position, a Stephanie Anderson product like himself who - in addition to her other skills - spoke Spanish. On paper, they didn't get any better than this.

"Is there a part of your current job that you don't like, Miss McKenzie? For example, the paperwork, the supervision, dealing with the public?"

Paula thought for a moment about how best to answer the hotel director's question. "I suppose I'm like everyone else. I hate to have to discipline a worker, but the positive interactions with staff overwhelmingly outweigh the negative ones. It's the same way with troublesome guests." That was a good answer, she thought, but Tolliver waited for more. "Okay, the paperwork is a pain," she admitted with a chuckle.

Tolliver laughed. He liked a manager with a sense of humor, knowing that someone like that usually worked well under stress. He had it on Stephanie's authority that Paula had a real talent for handling problems without letting things escalate. And he also knew that Stephanie wouldn't have kept a staffer for nine years if she couldn't handle paperwork.

"You know, our weather's a little different here," he cautioned.

"I'm looking for a change," she answered simply.

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"Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate this." Wynne pulled her crutches from the back seat and leaned them against the car door.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come up with you?"

"No, that's okay. I can hang this strap on my shoulder...."

"Wynne!" An excited Cheryl Williams rushed to meet her. "I'm so glad to finally see you here."

"Hi, Cheryl. Uh, this is my mother, Kitty Connelly."

Kitty leaned across the seat to say hello.

Cheryl pushed her hand inside the car in greeting. "Really pleased to meet you. We think the world of your daughter."

Wynne blushed like a schoolgirl on a date. Carefully, she pulled herself up and positioned the crutches beneath her arms.

"Let me take that," Cheryl stopped her, grabbing for the heavy briefcase. "Thanks for the delivery. I can take it from here." She waved to Kitty, who drove off slowly in her daughter's Volvo.

"Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome. Are you sure you're up for this already?"

"I'm sure that I'm about to go insane. Please let me stay today, even if you change your mind and fire me," she quipped. She loved her mother dearly, but they had spent nearly every waking hour together for the past three weeks.

"Okay, but we've decided not to pay you."

"Fine."

"...and that your new office will be beside the copy machine."

"Perfect."

"...and that Denise will be your secretary."

"You're cruel, Cheryl Williams."

"I know, but two of those weren't true."

"Denise," she sighed.

"She can handle your needs for now. You can pick out some seminars and send her on company time if you want. If things don't work out, come see me."

Wynne knew that she would make things work out. Denise was deficient, but she was dedicated and willing to learn.

The elevator deposited the pair on the top floor, where Wynne followed her boss to the west end of the building. Three slots in from the corner was a small office, its outside wall solid glass. An executive desk with a return for her computer faced the door. A bookcase, work table and three chairs packed the room.

"I know it's not the Taj Mahal, but it's your very own space. If you want to move things around, just buzz Denise and she'll find some muscles."

"It's great. I'm going to love it."

"After you've been here a while, you'll move up in the pecking order. In a year or two, you can

move to a side that doesn't get the afternoon sun. That's when you'll know you've hit the big time."

"You're forgetting I'm from Baltimore. I don't even plan to stand in the shade."

"I'll remind you of that."

On that note, Cheryl departed for her own corner office and Wynne struggled to her chair. Already, a stack of folders filled her inbox. Settling in, she reached for the first one. She was thrilled to be here.

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"Wow, Paula! If you think I'm going to say no to that, you're out of your mind!" Kevin Ross was ecstatic at his new boss's offer: She would take Tuesday and Wednesday off each week and he would have both Friday and Saturday. A person could practically have a life with the weekend free.

"Not that it's permanent, mind you. But I'd like to be here on the busy days until I get acclimated to the hotel and the staff."

"Well, you'll get no argument from me," the young man said happily. "Take all the time you need."

Paula liked her new co-worker quite a bit. He had spent the last two years running the business services center, and had also done his time in catering. He'd been on the job as Shift Manager for only two months when her predecessor left to take a job with Ritz-Carlton.

"So what do you do for fun in a place like Denver?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'm married. I don't ever get to have any fun."

That caused them both to laugh.

"So I've just granted you weekends off and you're going to waste them?"

"No, are you kidding? It means that Pam and I can actually go out of town once in awhile, skiing, or camping, or up to Estes Park. Of course, that also means I can't get out of going to spend time with my mother-in-law in Pueblo," he lamented.

"You can always tell her that you're on call," Paula suggested.



"I like the way you think, Paula," he chuckled.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to handle the room inspections today. I just need to get a feel for how everybody works."

"Knock yourself out. You want me to start the inventory?" Kevin was eager for the chance to do more of the management tasks.

"No, I'll do that when I get finished. Why don't you monitor the front desk and maybe pop in on the valet staff a little later?"

"Whatever you need." He was really going to like working with Paula McKenzie.

Paula started her inspection on the third floor, one floor above their meeting rooms. By the time she reached the Concierge floor, she was satisfied that the housekeeping staff was solid, and was glad to know that her first shift counterpart ran a tight ship. That would make her job easier.

The Concierge lounge hosts were setting up for happy hour, much as they did in Orlando, and as they did throughout the Weller Regent chain. The hotels weren't interchangeable - they were certainly unique in décor - but the major amenities were designed to be consistent from one hotel to the next. The Denver WR featured a Southwestern theme, the furnishings rustic, but comfortable. Here in the lounge, the windows opened out onto a spectacular view of the snow-capped Rockies, quite a contrast to the flat cypress expanse of Orlando.

The cozy arrangement of chairs in the corner conjured for Paula an unwelcome image of a tall, dark-haired woman. In fact, Wynne Connelly had become an irritating staple of her thoughts of late, especially on the long drive with Slayer to their new home almost two thousand miles away.

There was no denying the hurt she'd felt when she learned that she'd been no more than a dalliance.

*"I don't know what to say."* The words replayed bitterly in her head. There really was nothing to say, unless there was some other explanation than the obvious. And clearly, that wasn't the case or it would have surely been put forth. But Wynne had played the game so well that Paula had been nothing short of stunned by the other woman on the phone. The hardest part was that Paula had been convinced that Wynne had shared her feelings; and that left her with an uneasy feeling that she couldn't protect herself from being taken for a fool in the future.

Unless of course she just kept to herself.

And that's what the move to Denver was all about. It wasn't a new start. It wasn't really even the job, though that was a means to an end. For Paula, it was more about moving to a place where she didn't know anyone, and where she didn't want to know anyone. If she focused on doing a good job, she could soon move up to an operations post; if not here, then somewhere else.

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"If you want, you can start sleeping on the sofa in my office. Just keep your PJs in the bottom drawer of my desk."

Wynne looked up to find Cheryl standing in her doorway on Tuesday afternoon, briefcase in hand.

"Really, Wynne, the rest of us go home by this time, sometimes a little sooner even. Have we given you too much to do or are you just slow?" The last bit was meant to be teasing, but the executive could tell right away that her joke had fallen flat.

"No, I...you were just kidding, right?"

"Right," she assured, dropping her briefcase to take a seat across from her assistant VP's desk. "I'm going to have to tell my husband about you. He won't believe there's someone who gets here before I do and stays until after I'm gone."

"I'm in the middle of drawing up this branding campaign. Do you think we might have a few thousand in the budget for a couple of focus groups?"

"Sure, we can move it out of advertising if you think we need it."

"I do. I'd feel better if we had some sort of disaster check before we launched this."

"That's a good idea. Now go home."

"I just want to finish this...."

"I'm waiting. We're going to walk out together so I can verify that you're leaving." The older woman was serious.

"Okay," Wynne sighed, closing her folder.

"And no taking it home to work on," the executive chided as she watched her protégé move to place the folder in her briefcase. "That would defeat the purpose of pushing you out of here."

"Yes ma'am."

Together, the pair exited to the parking lot where Cheryl followed the younger woman to her car.

"How's your leg?" The limp wasn't nearly so pronounced as it had been before the surgery, but it was still there.

"It's a lot better. I'm still doing physical therapy, but they're starting to think I've reached the ceiling."

"Does it hurt much?"

"Not like it did, but I doubt I'll ever be pain free."

"That's too bad." Wynne had told Cheryl the awful story of the accident.

"I've gotten used to it." The pair stepped into the elevator. "Look, I said I'd go. You don't have to escort me, you know."

Cheryl chuckled. "Seriously, Wynne...I don't want to see you burn yourself out. I know there's a lot to do, but no one expects you to get it all done the first year you're on board. If you plan on being in this for the long haul, you need to get out and build a whole life here in Orlando, not just a work life."

"I know, Cheryl. I will." Actually, the idea of venturing out to explore the social scene in Orlando always led her to thoughts of Paula, and that triggered feelings of guilt and sadness. She'd been thinking a lot lately of the small blonde hotel manager, and wasn't at all interested in the idea of meeting someone new. "Believe it or not, I'm having a lot of fun at work right now."

"I can tell, and I appreciate all you're doing. But take it from an old pro: Save the best of yourself for your personal life, not your job."

Wynne nodded in understanding.

"You know, Wynne, we're a family here at Eldon-Markoff. Now I don't mean to be nosy, but if you aren't seeing anyone special, I'd be happy to host a couple of dinner parties to give you a chance to meet some single men, you know, professional men."

The tall woman forced a smile and looked away. She had hoped that Ken Markoff had already shared the tale of seeing her with Paula, holding hands in the restaurant. Apparently he hadn't, or she wouldn't be facing this awkward moment.

"Cheryl, thanks but...I'm really not interested in meeting...men."

"But you...oh. Women?"

The dark-haired woman nodded nervously. "But to tell you the truth, I'm really not interested in meeting anyone at all right now. I'm still sort of coming out of a relationship that didn't end well. I'd just like some time."

"I understand. But if I come across any interesting women - I'm not sure where, but you never know - I'll probably mention it, whether you're ready or not."

"Fair enough," Wynne agreed.

"Okay, this is as far as I go. I expect you to drive off, not just circle the lot until I'm out of sight so you can sneak back in."

"Scout's honor. See you tomorrow." Wynne started up her Volvo and backed out from her assigned space.

Instead of turning into her own neighborhood, she continued toward the condominium community where Paula McKenzie lived. Today was Tuesday, Paula's day off, and the thought of getting a peek of the hotel manager from afar was tantalizing. It wasn't exactly stalking - it was more like...unobtrusive observation, just checking up.

Slowly, the Volvo wound past the small lake, turning left toward the buildings that overlooked the neighboring golf course. Wynne's breath caught at once as she realized the garage door directly beneath Paula's end unit condo was open. But the car inside was not the dark green Miata; it was a red sedan of some sort. Quickly, she scanned the parking lot for the familiar car, continuing until the road ended.

Wynne turned around and proceeded back the way she'd come, slowing dramatically in front of her friend's place. She watched in confusion as the car began to back out, its passengers a couple, presumably husband and wife, and with a plainly visible child's car seat in the back.

The woman in the Volvo stopped to get her bearings, double-checking in her mind the details of her one visit to Paula's home. This was the location she remembered, and the number on the side of the building was the one she recalled giving the taxi driver.

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Wynne returned to the condominium complex the following day, as well as the next, both on the way to work and on the way home. When the weekend came, she paid one final visit, again spotting the family in the sedan.

Paula McKenzie didn't live here anymore.

Well there you go: A day late and a dollar short! [Part 5](#)

## ~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

### Part 5

#### Chapter 15

"It figures my first winter here would be the worst on record," Paula grumbled as she traded her knee-high boots for the low black heels that accompanied her uniform. The eight blocks from her downtown apartment were brutal in the cold weather, but not as bad when the wind wasn't blowing.

"We ordered this up just for you," Kevin joked.

"Fine, Kevin! I can understand January and February, but this is April. Give me a break already!"

"And the best part is that this might not even be the last of it."

"Oh yeah, that's the best part alright."

The phone on Paula's desk buzzed, signaling a direct patch from security.

"Paula McKenzie," she answered crisply. "Great...12th floor...okay, one of us will be right there."

"What have we got?"

"Some guy's smoking a cigar by the elevator on the 12th floor. Says his wife won't let him smoke it in the room."

Kevin stood and pulled a quarter from his pocket. "Winner chooses?" he asked hopefully, knowing full well that his boss could simply order him to the 12th floor.

"Heads."

The coin sailed into the air, turning over and over until he caught it and slapped it on the back of his other hand. "Heads it is."

"I'll take care of the cigar. You get the front desk. They're getting slammed." Paula gestured over her shoulder at the video.

"That was sneaky."

"It was lucky."

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"I can't believe you've never been to one of these travel and tourism conventions. You should get out and meet people, but don't talk much, okay? I'm afraid you'll get recruited and then I'd have to kill somebody," Cheryl Williams joked.

"Don't worry. I can't imagine I'd be as happy working for anybody else...but it's nice to know you're not taking me for granted." Wynne had been on the job in Orlando for nearly a year, and had continued to impress her boss, as well as CEO Ken Markoff. More every day, she felt at home in the company, and her responsibilities had grown as she proved herself again and again. Already, she had moved to an office on the building's south side.

"Believe me, I would never take you for granted." Leaning forward in the seat, Cheryl asked the cabbie, "Does it always snow this much in April?"

"I don't think this winter's ever going to end. We've had one storm after another since the first week in October...more snow than we've ever had before. At least today it's not in the single digits like it has been."

"Thank God for small favors," she groused. "Look at you, Wynne. All bundled up nice and warm. You're used to this from your days in Baltimore, I bet."

"Yeah, like he said, it's not so bad when it's in the twenties...unless the wind is blowing."

"Do you miss Baltimore?"

"Baltimore, no. I was homesick at first, but once my mom moved down, I don't think I gave it

another thought." Wynne had returned to Maryland for Christmas. During that single week, a water pipe in the old house ruptured and the furnace drew its last breath. That was enough for Kitty, who proposed that she give up the house for good and move south. Wynne's realtor found her a two-bedroom unit with a garage in the nice complex where Paula used to live. The marketer was pleasantly surprised at how glad she was to have her mother close again.

The cab wound through the maze of one-way streets in downtown Denver, finally pulling into the circle in front of the Weller Regent. They were immediately met by a valet in a down jacket and gloves with a wool cap pulled over his ears.

"Welcome to the Weller Regent, ladies. Sorry about the weather, but we'll do everything we can to make your visit as comfortable as possible." The young man smiled sincerely and collected their bags from the taxi's trunk, loading them onto a cart that was whisked indoors with the bundled women close behind.

"Warmth!" Cheryl exclaimed. "How do people live in this climate?"

"They say the same thing about us in August, don't they?" Wynne followed her boss to the registration desk. In her frequent travels, she often stayed in the Weller Regent, and each time she entered the reception area, she thought of Paula McKenzie. She had learned after finally getting up the nerve to call the Orlando hotel last fall that the pretty blonde was no longer working at the WR, but the employee she spoke with was prohibited from giving out further information.

"I'm supposed to meet a couple of old friends for dinner. You're welcome to join us if you'd like."

Wynne knew Cheryl well enough by now to know that the invitation was sincere, even though she'd only be tagging along.

"I don't think so. I'm probably just going to grab something upstairs in the lounge a little later and go to bed early. But I really appreciate the offer."

"Yeah, you're the smart one. With the two-hour time change, you're going to be rested tomorrow and I'll be walking around like a zombie. Don't let me give away any of our trade secrets, okay?"

Cheryl stepped forward to the reservation counter, looking back at her assistant VP who waited patiently for the next available clerk. It was a lucky day for Eldon-Markoff when they brought Wynne Connelly on board in the corporate office. The woman was a workhorse, not to mention smart and innovative. Best of all, she had a presence about her, a demeanor that practically demanded attention. In only a year, the young executive had taken the position to a higher level than either she or Ken Markoff had envisioned, and was already sprinkling her ideas and initiatives into their sales department. No way were they going to let Wynne Connelly go to work for the competition.

When she walked up to the busy counter to check in, the tall woman couldn't help but notice that

the clerk who assisted her wore a nametag that identified him as a Shift Manager. Checking her watch, she confirmed that his was the second shift...Paula's shift...in fact, he had the same job here in Denver as Paula had held in Orlando.

"Wynne Connelly," she announced, handing over her credit card.

"Yes, Ms. Connelly. I have you for two nights on our Concierge floor, king-sized, non-smoking."

"That's right."

Kevin Ross worked efficiently to complete the check-in process. He used to hate the times when he had to fill in at the front desk, but over the last year, his new boss had helped him appreciate the opportunity to interact with both staff and guests. The front desk got the lion's share of problems and complaints and he'd learn more about dealing with them by exercising his newfound authority here. Best of all, she'd said, his example would help the younger clerks do a better job, and that paid off when they learned to handle difficult requests on their own.

"Here you are, Ms. Connelly." Sliding the key card across the counter, Ross directed her to the elevators and informed her of the perks she'd receive with her upgrade. "I hope you have a nice stay, and if you have any problem at all, please let someone know and we'll do our best to take care of it."

Wynne smiled and nodded, thinking back to the way Paula had handed her a business card, pointing out the direct extension. Flirting.

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Paula hated situations like the one she was walking into. The fact that security was already involved and had called her indicated that they hadn't been able to diffuse the situation with just their presence.

Exiting the elevator, she was met at once by one of the guards. "Do you have the gentleman's name yet?" she asked, all business.

"No, and this guy is not exactly a gentleman, if you know what I mean. If I had to guess, I'd say he likes his Johnny Walker straight up."

"It's four o'clock in the afternoon, for crying out loud." Paula turned from the guard to appraise the uncooperative guest, who sat in an armchair by a potted plant - his ashtray, she observed - holding a drink in one hand, and a cigar in the other. He was a large, barrel-chested man, his tie knotted loosely but still obscuring his neck. His bulbous face was red and his eyes had that unfocused look that indeed said "I'm drunk as hell."



"Hello, I'm Paula McKenzie. I'm the manager here. They tell me that your wife won't let you smoke that cigar in your room. Is that right?"

"Goddamn right!" he barked.

"That's too bad, Mr. ...." She waited a moment, but he didn't take the bait. "But I'm afraid that the city of Denver has an ordinance that prohibits smoking in the common areas of all public buildings, so your choices are pretty limited. You either have to stay in your room, or you can go to the smoking area on the second floor. Unfortunately, that's on an outside balcony."

"Or I can sit right here," he answered belligerently.

"No, that isn't one of your choices, unless you put out the cigar. I think it would be best if you returned to your room. I'd be happy to explain the rules to your wife. Maybe she'd change her mind." Her voice was calm and steady, and her face bore just a hint of an encouraging smile.

"Can I smoke in the bar?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I'm going to sit right here until I finish." Extracting his lighter, he relit the smelly cigar.

Paula sighed. "Look, as the manager, I have to enforce the smoking rules or I'll get in trouble with the hotel director. If that happens, I could lose my job; and if I lose my job, they might take my children away from me. Please help me here. All you have to do is put out the cigar and go back to your room."

The man looked at his drink, then at his cigar. "You mean you might get fired if I don't put this out."

Paula nodded with a pleading look.

"How many kids you got?"

"Two," she lied, "Josh and Jordan." It was handy to have a nephew and niece top of mind.

"Well, I don't want you to lose your kids on account of me," he finally acquiesced, turning to stub out the cigar in the plant.

"Why don't you let me take that?" Paula intercepted the smoking object, dousing it at once in what was left of the man's drink. "I really appreciate you helping me out on this one. Why don't you stop by the front desk when I'm working tomorrow and I'll see that you get a coupon for a free drink in the bar?"

"Okay, thanks."

Paula turned back to her two security guards who were waiting at the ready in case the situation had escalated. "Will you see that this gentleman gets back to his room okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

From the corner of her eye, Paula glimpsed the elevator door opening to allow a businessman to exit. The lighted arrow pointed upward, and she was vaguely aware of two women who remained on the car. As the doors began to close, her eyes met those of the tall dark-haired woman and she froze.

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Wynne's heart pounded the very instant she recognized the hotel manager. The sensations were almost overwhelming: the tightened stomach, the shaking hands, the rapid breathing.

"Are you okay?" Cheryl noticed at once that her companion had fallen back against the side of the elevator, gripping the rail for support.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just got...queasy all of a sudden."

"You better not be getting sick. Being sick at a hotel is one of the worst experiences there is."

"No, I'm fine, really," she assured, though her voice shook in response to the adrenalin rush. So Paula McKenzie had moved to Denver.

The door opened on the top floor and both women stepped out, checking the placard to locate their rooms.

"I'm in 2116. Call me if you start feeling sick. If I'm not in, call my cell phone." Cheryl knew she was mothering her protégé, but after raising three children, it was her nature to worry about other people.

"I'm okay, honest. It was just...nothing."

"Alright, but call me if you need anything."

"I will. But go out and have a good time with your friends. Don't worry, okay?"

"If you say so."

"I say so. I'll see you in the morning. Watch the margaritas."

"Spoilsport."

Wynne pushed her card into the slot across the hall from her boss and stepped inside, leaning her back against the door as it closed. Coming face to face with Paula had completely unnerved her. An array of emotions had surfaced all at once: surprise, guilt, apprehension. And desire.

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Paula returned quickly to her desk, her fingers fumbling anxiously as she called up the guest register on her terminal. Scanning the details, she confirmed that her imagination wasn't at play.

*K. Wynne Connelly, two-nights. Room 2117, billed to Eldon-Markoff.*

So she hung onto her job after all, Paula thought. "And of all the hotels in Denver, she had to walk into mine," she murmured, understanding how Humphrey Bogart must have felt when Ingrid Bergman entered his club in Morocco.

There had been whole days of late when Paula hadn't thought of the beautiful woman from Baltimore, but it didn't take much to conjure the image. Anytime she saw an elegant woman traveling alone, she remembered Wynne Connelly. And if one of those women spoke to her in a friendly way, she automatically invoked her most professional demeanor, a wall of resistance to familiarity. Even after almost a year, the wariness lingered, leaving her more isolated than she had ever felt. Thank goodness she had a job that she loved.

And tonight, Wynne Connelly was staying in her hotel.

Like a moth to the flame, she needed to see Wynne, to talk to her again, if only to snipe a bit and let her know that she had risen above it. People shouldn't be allowed to treat others like that and get off scot free. But she wanted Wynne to know that she was over it...even if her own shaking hands were telling her otherwise.

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Wynne turned back to her notes for tomorrow's meeting, reading the paragraph for the third time, still not comprehending the words. She was situated in the corner of the Concierge lounge, looking up from time to time to admire the sunset over the Rockies. She'd held this vigil for over two hours, hoping - but doubting - that Paula would once again stop by to say hello.

It was almost nine as she finished her second glass of red wine. Paula would know where to find her, she knew, if the hotel manager would even consider speaking to her. Her last words - on the phone at the Hyatt - hadn't been harsh, but there was definitely finality in her tone.

There was so much Wynne wanted to say about what had happened. She needed to apologize not only for what she'd done, but for the way she had run away from the mess she'd made. Mostly, she wanted to tell Paula that her feelings had been real.

Suddenly, she felt more than saw the familiar face was coming her way; a fixed expression not giving away the blonde woman's mood. As it had in the elevator, Wynne's heart rate increased and her stomach fluttered in anticipation.

"Hello, Wynne," the hotel manager said formally.

"Paula...it's good to see you."

"I'm glad to see that things worked out for you with Eldon-Markoff." Paula tried to sound casual, fighting hard to conceal the emotions that the sight of this woman called up.

"Thank you," Wynne answered meekly. It was difficult not to feel as though she was under judgment. Spotting the nametag above the pocket of the black blazer, she returned the sentiment. "And I see you've made Senior Shift Manager. Congratulations."

"Yeah, I decided that I was ready to relocate." She didn't add that the circumstances of their parting had made it easier to leave Orlando. No, Paula wasn't about to say anything to suggest that their relationship had been anything more than spontaneous.

"It must have been a difficult decision, leaving your family and a hotel you liked so much."

"I like this hotel, and I'm enjoying the new job. How about you?"

"Things are good. I..." She decided against telling Paula that she too had relocated. It wasn't important now that the other woman was no longer there, and Wynne really didn't want to underscore the irony. "I really like what I'm doing now. They keep me pretty busy."

Paula wanted to say more; actually, she wanted Wynne to say more, but she didn't want to be the one to press it. "Well, I hope things keep working out for you."

"Have dinner with me," the brunette suddenly blurted.

"You've got to be kidding." Paula looked around awkwardly to see if others were within earshot.

"I'm not. Paula, I have so many things I want to tell you. Please."

"No," she answered adamantly. "It isn't necessary, Wynne. It wasn't a big deal. We got carried

away and did something we shouldn't have. End of story."

Despite the words of denial, Wynne could feel the anger and hurt emanating from the woman before her. She looked away and shook her head sadly. Turning back, she held Paula's eyes with her own. "Would it help at all to tell you that I'm sorry?"

Paula could see the sadness for herself in the shining blue eyes, but she was determined not to respond to it. It didn't matter now anyway, and there was no way she was going to show how naïve she'd been. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I didn't have any expectations. When people let things happen too fast, it's easy to make mistakes."

To Wynne, the words sounded cold and calculated, but who was she to argue that it had been more than just getting "carried away" for her. The voice that started in her head the moment she met Paula McKenzie had warned her not to let it happen, but she had chosen to ignore it and like Paula said, she made a mistake. And perhaps the woman standing before her was the price of her poor judgment, and Wynne just had to let her know that she realized that.

"Paula, it was my mistake, not yours," she offered, "and what I regret the most is that I screwed things up with you."

"That you did." She hadn't meant to sound so flippant, but 11 months of stewing about it had left her bitter. Still, the sad blue eyes made her want to soften, made her want to forgive, and made her want to say that it was alright. "Look, I...need to go. It was good to see you again."

Wynne nodded. "Thanks for coming by." Soon afterwards, she retreated to her room, still wound up at having seen Paula, and deeply saddened at where they'd left things. Despite everything that had transpired, she knew without a doubt that if Paula were still in Orlando, she'd find a way to be with her. No one had ever made her feel this way.

In her office on the second floor, the blonde woman pushed her hands through her hair. The encounter had left her nearly drained. That woman upstairs made her feel things, and after this time, it still hurt.

## **Chapter 14**

"Paula, over here!" the graying-blond woman shouted as she spotted her daughter coming through the terminal exit.

"Mom!" Rushing the final few steps, Paula dropped her shoulder bag and wrapped her mother in a hug. "I've missed you guys so much!"

"We've missed you too. Josh and Jordan talked about you all through breakfast."

"Are they here?"

"No, I came by myself. I was being selfish because I wanted you all to myself for an hour."

"Fine by me." The two women lingered in baggage claim as they waited for the carousel to deposit her luggage.

"So are you still liking Denver, honey?"

"I'm not sure I ever actually said that I liked Denver, but I really love my hotel."

"You don't like it there?"

"It's okay, I guess. It was awfully cold all winter. And those two blizzards we got in April didn't help matters. But it's actually quite pleasant right now."

"Have you had a chance to get out much?" Once again, Maxine found herself worrying about her daughter, knowing that she was giving too much of herself to the Weller Regent at the expense of finding even a modicum of personal happiness.

"A little. The Rockies are gorgeous and I've taken a few drives."

"By yourself, I suppose."

Paula shrugged. "Yeah, it's hard to find someone who's free to do something on a Tuesday or Wednesday." The red rollerboard appeared on the carousel. "Here's my bag."

Moments later, they were getting into Maxine's white Accord, bound for Cocoa Beach. Paula reveled in the warm humidity of Orlando in June.

"Can I ask you a question, sweetheart?"

"Of course," Paula answered tentatively. She and her mom rarely talked about personal matters but the tone of the older woman's voice suggested that it was going to be that kind of question.

"Do you...date anyone? I don't mean to pry, and you can tell me that it's none of my business if you want, but honey, sometimes I just can't bear to think about you being alone all the time."

Paula chuckled. If her mother only knew.... Why not? "Actually, there was someone not too long ago, but things didn't work out."

"Oh? Someone in Denver?"

"No, it was here in Orlando actually, just before I left. I met her at the hotel. She was a guest."

This revelation surprised Maxine, not only because Paula had never mentioned it to anyone, but also because it was important enough to her to bring it up here and now, over a year later. "Was it serious?"

"It could have been, at least to me," she answered honestly.

"What happened?"

"She wasn't...single. She had a girlfriend back in Baltimore...one that she forgot to mention." Paula surprised herself by tearing up at the memory.

"Oh, Paula, I'm so sorry. Why didn't you talk to us about it?" Maxine already knew the answer to that: Ever since they'd sat in judgment the day their daughter had left for Europe 15 years ago, the subject of her love life was one they all avoided. Paula had been so quiet when she brought that one girlfriend around - Susan something or other, and Maxine and Ray took that to mean that their daughter wasn't comfortable sharing her personal life.

"I just had to deal with it on my own, I guess."

"Is that why you took the job in Denver?"

"Maybe a little. It seemed like a good time to put some distance between myself and this place. But the main reason was the job. Of course, if I had known the one here was going to open up...."

Approaching the ramp to the Beeline Expressway, Maxine briefly changed the subject. "Do you want to go check on your place?" Paula had turned her condo over to a management company to rent, hoping that someday she'd find her way back to Orlando. The tenants' lease had expired in May and the agency was doubtful they would get another renter until fall.

"Sure, we can do that. No one's living there right now, so I doubt the lights are even on." Paula started groping in her purse for the key.

Maxine turned northwest toward her daughter's condo. "Do you want to talk about that woman some more?" Whoever this woman from Baltimore was, she obviously meant a lot to Paula, or it wouldn't still prompt the tears in her daughter's eyes.

"Not really." The last thing Paula wanted to do was waste her weekend in Florida with sad thoughts. "Tell me about Josh and Jordan, and what's new with Dad."

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"So what do you think? Are people going to hide their eyes when they see this?" Kitty Connelly stopped and turned to model her dark blue swimsuit. At 62 years old, she bore the slightly plump physique of one who had lived a sedentary life after having two children.

"I don't think anyone will run screaming, but they may have to reach for their sunglasses." Her mom's alabaster legs hadn't seen the sun in over 30 years.

"Very funny," the elder woman scoffed. "I'm giving myself a half-hour, then it's under the umbrella."

"I think that's a good idea." Wynne, on the other hand, was eager to work on her tan, which made the scars on her legs and abdomen less visible. She'd been out a few times in her back yard and was already sporting a golden glow. With a darker tan, her eyes seemed bluer and her hair shone with deep auburn highlights. She absolutely loved the feel of the sun on her skin.

The Connellys walked in the stifling heat to the fenced-in pool area, already crowded with others who had the same idea for escaping the summer heat. Spotting two chaise lounges in the corner by an umbrella, Wynne spread out their towels as she and her mom settled in. It was fun being able to spend time with her mom just relaxing together. The move to Orlando had turned out to be good for both of them, and Janelle was already talking about coming to Florida when she finished school.

"Did I tell you that I'm having dinner tonight with the Shumachers and one of their friends from New York? They're such nice people. She used to be a...."

Wynne was already absorbed in her book, stretched out on her stomach with the clasp of her top hanging unfastened at her sides. As she became more aware that her mother was speaking, she raised up to listen. A white sedan in the distance stole her attention as it pulled to a stop in front of the unit that used to belong to the woman she knew. She watched in utter amazement as two women exited and disappeared inside the upstairs condo. One of the women looked like Paula McKenzie!

"Uh, hello there," Kitty spoke up anxiously to get her daughter's attention. Wynne seemed completely oblivious to the fact that she had lifted up so far that her bare breasts were now visible to anyone who cared to look.

"Oops!" Wynne lowered herself and snapped her top into place. Now sitting up, she stared at the end unit to confirm what she'd seen. After only a few minutes, the two women came out and returned to the car. The petite blonde definitely looked like Paula, but Wynne couldn't make out the features of the other woman from this distance. Whoever she was, she and Paula were certainly familiar, apparent from the casual way their arms hooked together.



The uncomfortable feeling of watching Paula McKenzie walking arm in arm with another woman gave way to curiosity. Why would Paula be in Orlando? And why would she visit her former home? Was she moving back to Florida?

"...so anyway, after dinner, we might play a few hands of bridge and see if we all hit it off. It might become a regular thing."

"That's nice, Mom."

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"Paula, you look fabulous!" Jolene gushed as she eyed her former boss, decked out today in a light blue sleeveless cocktail dress with ivory shoes.

"Wow, so do you!" She beamed at her protégé, glad at once to see a familiar face.

"We miss you so much! I mean, Belinda's okay, but she's sort of...I don't know...unbending, if you know what I mean. Stephanie had to pull rank so we could all get the day off today."

"It's a tough job sometimes, Jolene. I'm sure she's trying to do what's best for the hotel," Paula cajoled. "Speaking of Stephanie, is she here?"

"I haven't seen her yet, but I'm sure she's coming."

No one who knew Rusty Wilburn would miss this day, the day Juliana became his bride. Following their honeymoon, the couple would hastily pack for a move to Philadelphia, where Rusty would take over as the Manager of Hotel Operations for the day shift - a great job in the Weller Regent chain, and one he roundly deserved, Paula thought.

She had read in the WR newsletter about her friend's promotion, and couldn't help but feel a pang of regret about her move to Denver, especially since Rusty's job of Senior Manager for the night shift - the same post she now held in Denver - was temporarily empty. Though she was tempted to ask Stephanie about it, a parallel move in the company after such a short stint wouldn't look good for future considerations. She was happy for Rusty, but envious of the one who would fill his vacant slot.

"Well, if it isn't the Prodigal Daughter!"

Paula immediately turned to the familiar voice and reached out to hug her mentor. "Stephanie!"

"How are you, hon? I've been hearing great things about you in Denver. Did I ever tell you that Vince Tolliver sent me flowers a month after you got there?"

"You're kidding!" Paula laughed. She knew Vince liked her work, but this information was pretty good leverage for the next time she wanted something from her hotel director.

"No, he's crazy about you."

"Well, I'm pretty happy there. It's a great hotel, and the people are wonderful."

"Happier than you were here?" the director asked.

Not even close, Paula thought, but Stephanie didn't want to hear that. "It's different. You know how much I love the WR here, and how much I enjoyed all the people that work there...and how much I respected my boss," she winked at that last remark.

"I figured as much. When Rusty told me he got the Philly job, I almost picked up the phone then to ask you to come back, but pulling you out of Denver so soon like that wouldn't have been good for your career."

Paula nodded. Those had been her thoughts exactly.

"But if it were a different position, a promotion to operations, perhaps...."

The blonde woman froze as she absorbed her former boss's words. Was she saying...?

"We better go grab our seats. Why don't you see me at the reception and we'll talk more?" Stephanie suggested with a sly wink. She could see by the look on her former employee's face that she was more than intrigued.

For the next hour, Paula tried valiantly to concentrate on her dear friend, whose wedding going on at the front of the small church. In the back of her mind, her thoughts were on what Stephanie had hinted. If there was any chance at all that she could come back to Orlando without risking her future at Weller Regent, she'd do it.

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Two weeks passed after the mysterious "Paula sighting" at her mother's condominium complex, and Wynne was unable to get the pretty blonde out of her mind. On a hunch that her friend was headed back this way, Wynne called the Weller Regent in Denver, only to learn from a staffer that Paula was off on Wednesdays but was expected in the next afternoon. So that was all it was: just a visit to Orlando, and probably a chance to see her family. Odd, though, that she'd stopped by her old condo.

Each time she drove over to visit her family, Wynne found herself drawn to check out the end unit that had belonged to her friend. Best she could tell, it was empty. But what if Paula still owned the place, expecting someday to return? Maybe the Denver thing was just a temporary assignment.

Wynne got her answer in late August, when she happened upon the "On the Move" column of the *Orlando Business Review*. It was only a tidbit and she might have missed it, but the bolded name leapt out at her.

*The Orlando Weller Regent is pleased to announce that **Paula R. McKenzie** has been promoted to the position of Manager, Hotel Operations. An 11-year veteran of the Weller Regent Corporation, Ms. McKenzie returns to her native Florida from Denver, where she served as Senior Shift Manager in the Weller Regent's newest hotel property.*

"Okay, it took me a while, but I finally met someone really nice that made me think of you. You interested?" Cheryl Williams stood in her doorway, an expectant look on her face.

"Huh...?" Her thoughts elsewhere, Wynne was startled by the sudden appearance of her boss. What the hell was this woman talking about?

"I'm thinking a small dinner party next Saturday. The two of you could have a chance to meet and chat informally. If you hit it off, great! If you don't...hey, it didn't cost you anything."

"Uh, you mean...a woman?"

"Uh, yes," she mocked her assistant VP. "Isn't that what you ordered?"

Wynne couldn't stifle the laugh that erupted at the thought of her boss scrounging for her potential dates. But the thought of making small talk with a stranger under Cheryl's watchful eye held no appeal at all. "I, uh...I'm sort of seeing somebody," she lied, glancing back at the *Business Review*.

"Oh yeah?" Cheryl was certainly intrigued by this pronouncement. "Anyone I know?"

"I don't think so. We haven't been seeing each other long."

"Well I'm glad to hear that, Wynne. You'll keep me posted, won't you?"

"Sure." She hoped to be seeing someone very soon. Paula McKenzie was back in town!

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"You wouldn't believe how good it is to see you back here. Now how do I get bumped to day shift?" Jolene asked her mentor.

"That should be easy...three to five years on the night desk gets you to catering or the business center; then another two years after that gets you to the daytime desk."

The African-American woman groaned. "I don't think I can stand Belinda for three to five more years."

Paula chuckled softly, looking about to see if the woman who had replaced her over a year ago was nearby. "You were just spoiled because I was such a pushover. You know, it takes a while to build a rapport with somebody, and she might be struggling with it as much as you are."

"I don't think so, Paula. She just doesn't seem to try very hard to get along with people."

"Let me give you a little advice here, okay? This is how things work at the WR. If your boss does something that breaks the rules, then you should file a grievance. Everything's spelled out in the handbook. But if it's just a personality clash, then you're more likely to be the one that gets judged on how it all gets resolved. I know that sounds unfair, Jolene, but that's the way it is. Weller Regent loves it when everyone on the staff gets along, but it isn't realistic to think it's going to happen all the time. If Belinda is doing her job, the WR is going to throw her all the support she needs."

"I know you're right. And I know that I can always count on you to tell it just like it is."

Paula smiled and chucked the woman's arm gently. "Like I said, you're spoiled. And I know it probably makes you feel better to get it off your chest, but I would also suggest that you try not to do that at work, or with any of the others that work here. It just gives it a life of its own, and makes everything worse."

Jolene nodded, feeling embarrassed at having shown an unprofessional side of herself to this woman she respected so much.

"But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't speak up if you think you're being treated in a way that's against our employment practices. And if you aren't sure about it, you can always come to me. Just try to be discreet, okay?"

Paula was finishing up her first day back on the job in Orlando. What Jolene didn't know was that Stephanie had already briefed her on what she considered an alarming number of informal complaints regarding the night Shift Manager, and with Rusty's post now open, the WR needed to follow up on those, as the person just hired to take his place was now Belinda's immediate supervisor. Without a moment's thought, Paula offered to fill in a few nights to help smooth the

transition and Stephanie immediately took her up on it.

But right now, it was 4:30, a half hour since her shift ended, and Paula was eager to get home. For the next few days, home was her parents' house in Cocoa Beach, an hour and 15 minutes from the WR. Her furniture was en route, and while the WR was willing to put her up for free, she had Slayer to consider. The 30-hour drive in the small convertible had traumatized him, and it didn't feel right just to leave him on his own with her parents.

Paula had to admit that it was pretty fabulous to walk into a house filled with lively conversation and the aroma of dinner. The last year in Denver had left her feeling lonely and isolated, and she'd finally admitted to herself that she had overreacted to the dismal ending of her short affair with Wynne Connelly. She needed to give her social life a little attention, and now that she was working the day shift, she might even be able to get out and meet people.

## Chapter 15

"You're getting to be a fixture here, Wynne. What's the matter? Didn't pay your light bill?" Kitty teased.

"Very funny," her daughter answered. "Did you ever stop to think that I might just enjoy your company?"

"I'm not complaining. I like seeing you this much," Kitty assured her eldest daughter. The elder Connelly had undergone something of a transformation after moving. It wasn't just the fact that the condo association now took care of many of the things that worried her so back in Baltimore. It was also that she'd left behind the reminders of the pain and sorrow that had shrouded her after losing her beloved husband. Here in Orlando, she had started to make friends again, friends who hadn't known her only as Dr. Connelly's wife.

Wynne felt a little guilty at her mother's questions, and vowed to come clean eventually; but for now, she kept to herself the purpose of her frequent visits. The sight of the moving van as she pulled into the complex today made her spirits soar, but it was the white sedan in the garage instead of the green Miata, and that worried her more than a little. It might mean that Paula had sold the place or was renting it again, but her familiarity with this new woman in the white car was unmistakable. Was it possible that the two were moving in together? That was certainly disconcerting.

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"Look at all you've done!" Paula was ecstatic to walk in and find her furniture in place, the kitchen and baths set up, and both of her beds dressed in crisp clean sheets. The closet by the entryway held a stack of cardboard boxes, broken down flat for the recycle bin.

"I didn't know what you wanted to do with all your books and pictures, so I left them in their boxes on the porch. Oh, and I hate to tell you this, but everything you own needs to be ironed." Maxine McKenzie was sprawled on the couch, the red-stained plate nearby a telltale sign of the pizza she had ordered.

"Mom, I can't believe you did all this. You must have worked all day."

"Not all day. The truck didn't get here until about two o'clock."

"What did you do all morning?"

"I scrubbed the bathrooms and the kitchen...swept out the garage. Oh, and I cleaned all the windows."

"You're kidding! And I thought I had a rough day!" Paula had worked a double shift, filling in as promised in the Senior Shift Manager post while the new hire settled in. "You get to name your reward."

"You mean that?"

"Anything you like. You want a professional massage? A manicure and a pedicure? Name it."

"Okay. What I want is for you to start living more of your life away from that hotel."

Paula looked at her mother perplexed. "You mean not work as much?"

"Yes, but more than just not being there. Now that you're working on the day shift - at least as soon as you get through this temporary duty - I'd like to see you start having more fun, start doing things with friends, maybe even meet somebody."

"From your lips to God's ears, Mom," Paula said sincerely.

Maxine sat up, surprised at her daughter's easy agreement. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. I've been thinking about it a lot." The younger woman kicked off her shoes and sat down in her favorite chair, tucking a foot underneath her. It was almost midnight and both of them were beat, but ever since the talk they'd had when she'd come back for Rusty's wedding,

Paula realized that she really wanted to start sharing more of her personal life with her family. It felt good to be able to connect with her mom this way, and she liked to think that when she did meet somebody special, they'd be happy for her. "I'm going to make a real effort to get out and meet people."

"Do you have a lot of...women friends?" Maxine meant *lesbian* friends.

"No, but I think the most important thing is just to make friends - all kinds of friends. Eventually you start to meet people here and there who you have things in common with, and then you meet their friends, and their friends, and so on. But I'm serious, Mom. I'm not going to live every minute of my life for the Weller Regent. This last year has really taught me the consequences of not having a life outside of work."

Her mother smiled. "I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that, honey. I guess all parents want to see their kids happy, but I've been a little selfish about that. I've wanted to see you happy with somebody, not just at work. Your dad and I are really proud of what you've accomplished at the Weller Regent, but it would pale next to seeing you in love with somebody."

For some reason, Paula blushed as she thought about of being in love. Clearly, she had further to go with feeling completely comfortable talking about this stuff with her mom, but it was sort of freeing in a way. That said, she hoped her mother would never ask about her sex life.

"We should go to bed. Don't you have to be at work early?"

"My shift starts at seven," Paula answered, standing wearily. "I really appreciate everything you did today. You should sleep in tomorrow, okay? I'll come down and pick up Slayer after work."

"I might take you up on the sleeping in part, but don't worry about Slayer. He can stay with us as long you need."

"But I'll miss him, and besides, he'll be excited to get back to his old haunts. I bet the lizards line up on the window to see him. They'll all be fat, though, because they haven't had any exercise in a year."

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The white car was gone today. A green Miata with Colorado tags sat in the open garage, and Wynne caught a glimpse from afar of a petite blonde woman lugging flattened cardboard boxes across the parking area to the recycle bin. After one more trip, she backed out of the garage and was gone.

"What do you keep watching out there?" Janelle asked.

"Just...somebody moving in."

"Somebody in particular?" Kitty walked into the living room, now interested in her oldest daughter's answer. Since that day at the pool, she too had noticed that Wynne was keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on at the end unit of the first building.

Lying to and about Paula McKenzie had already caused her enough problems. Wynne knew she should just come clean. If she were going to try to pull the hotel manager back into her life, everything needed to be in the light of day.

"Yeah, it's somebody I know," she confessed. "You remember when we first looked at this place I told you that I knew someone who used to live here?"

Kitty nodded.

"That's who it is. She moved to Denver right after I got the job here, but I guess she held on to her place. Then I read that she'd been promoted and was coming back."

"Is she a friend of yours?" her mother asked.

Wynne sighed. "She used to be. But I...screwed things up."

If Kitty was surprised at this, she didn't show it. "Why don't you tell me about her?" Pulling a chair up to the window, she waited for the details. She didn't want the glossed-over version.

"Okay, her name is Paula McKenzie and she works downtown at the Weller Regent. That's where I used to stay when I was coming back and forth. We got to be friends and we...went out a few times." Hopefully, her mother wouldn't press for more than that.

"So what happened?"

What exactly did happen? "We just.... What happened was that I didn't really expect to have the feelings that I had, or for her to feel the way she did about me. It started as something casual and it took off."

"Isn't that what you wanted to happen?" she asked, not yet getting the picture.

"Well, there was Heather....," as if that explained it.

"Oh," Kitty said simply, as she started to comprehend. "So this was going on while you and Heather were still...together." Her tone was one of understanding, not judgment.

"Yeah," the dark-haired woman confessed, not quite believing that she was having this kind of conversation with her mom. "But then when I found out about the VP job, I realized that I'd screwed up by not being more upfront about my situation. It wouldn't have mattered if we'd kept



things on just a friendship level, but we didn't."

"Why was that was a problem? You split up with Heather before you moved down here."

Wynne shifted uncomfortably. "That's right, but the things between Paula and me happened when I was coming down here, when I was still living with Heather. They didn't know about each other. Before I got the job offer, I never figured we really had any possibility of making anything out of it, so I just didn't see the point. But then she called the house one night and Heather answered the phone...."

"And that ruined everything," Kitty finished.

"Well, it was certainly the last nail in the coffin. I'd already made up my mind that I had to tell her, sort of no matter what happened, but I was hoping that we could find a way to maybe step back and start over. But when she found out on her own, things just sort of fell apart, and the next thing I knew, she'd moved to Denver."

The two women sat quietly in the living room, both reveling somewhat at the unusual closeness they felt. The last time they'd had a heartfelt conversation like this was when Kitty had asked her daughter if she'd done something to cause such a problem for Heather. Wynne had tried to explain away her lover's rudeness as a product of her upbringing, but in the end, she'd conceded that there was no legitimate reason for Heather to treat her family that way. But she'd assured her mother that Heather would never come between them.

"So does the fact that you're watching her again mean that you're still interested?"

Wynne nodded solemnly. "It's been a year and I haven't really been able to get her out of my mind...or to stop kicking myself."

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"I can't believe how out of shape I am," Val wheezed as they rounded the final turn and headed back toward Paula's condo.

"You and me both. This air seems so heavy," the blonde woman complained, out of practice with running in the heat and humidity. She'd gotten used to Denver's mile-high climate, even though that meant running indoors on a treadmill for much of the winter.

"You sure you don't want to go back to the night shift? It would be better for my health and body image."

"Not a chance. This is what I've been working toward for 11 years."

"Yeah, I envy you. But I guess as long as I stay in the sports bar business, I'm never going to get to have a normal life."

"Then switch jobs," Paula advised, puffing as her tired feet continued to pound the paved jogging trail.

"Easy to say, but what would I do?"

"Are you kidding? You could manage a restaurant anywhere in town. You might not make as much to start as you do at Flanagan's but you'd get to have friends, and go out at night. What's the point of making all that money if you can't ever do the things you want to do?"

"I really like Flanagan's, though."

"Yeah, I know, and I like the Weller Regent. But I'm not going to let it take center stage any more. I want more out of life than just a good job."

"Yeah, me too, I guess. Turning 30 really made me start thinking about it more."

"You could always wait like I did until you start pushing 35, but then you'd have lost another five years with nothing to show for it." The women reached the end of the path, where they both gratefully stopped, bending over with their hands on their knees. "You want to come up for a drink?"

"No, I have to go. Some of us still have to work Saturdays," Val grouched.

"You really ought to think about finding something new. Did I tell you that I joined a women's volleyball league?" That was in fact Paula's first step at creating a social life.

"Yeah, that's cool." Val held her car door open a moment before getting in to allow cooler air to circulate inside. "So when do we get to do this again?"

"I'm off tomorrow, Monday, and Tuesday. Then I work 10 days in a row. It's going to be hard to get on a schedule to work out together, unless you can come over on the nights you're off."

"We'll see. I've really missed seeing your red face nearly every day."

"I've missed you too, Val. I'd give you a mushy hug, but you're all sweaty," she laughed, making a face.

"Call me."

"You got it. Maybe I'll stop by Flanagan's some night."

"Do that. Your drinks are on the house."

Paula wearily climbed the stairs and entered her condo. A shower would feel great, but first she needed something cold to drink. Had she not stopped in the kitchen, she'd have missed the small knock on the door.

"Forget something?" she called as she returned to the entry. The sight of Wynne Connelly nearly stole her breath.

"Hi."

"Wynne." It was all she could say as the shock registered. The long-legged beauty stood before her, looking tanned and relaxed in shorts and a white sleeveless top.

"I, uh, moved here to Orlando while you were gone," she began. "And I read in the paper last week that you were back at the Weller Regent."

"You moved here?" This was unbelievable.

"Yeah, right about the time you left. Eldon-Markoff made me an assistant VP," she explained. Wynne had hoped for an invitation to come in but it was not forthcoming. Either she had underestimated Paula's anger toward her, or the blonde woman still wasn't fully convinced that what she was seeing was real.

"This is...I don't know what it is."

"It's good to see you again. Really good."

"Wynne, I...."

"Anyway, the reason I stopped by was to make sure you knew about this." From the pocket of her shorts, the tall woman pulled a folded blue flyer announcing a Labor Day picnic next weekend for those living in the condo complex.

"You live here?" This conversation was growing more bizarre by the minute.

"No, I live across the highway, in a house off Terrell Drive. But my mom lives here...right over there in Building 4," she pointed to the building nearest the community pool.

The stunned look on Paula's red sweaty face was priceless.

"She moved down here last March, and I thought she would like it here," she continued. "She does. She likes it very much. So I was hoping that you were planning on coming to the picnic so you can meet her, now that she's your new neighbor."

Paula took the flyer and studied it. She had gotten one in her mailbox and made a mental note to put in an appearance, even if only for a few minutes; Labor Day was usually a day for family

things in Cocoa Beach. "I, uh...I think I have other plans."

"Well, I understand. But I hope you'll reconsider. I'd really like for my mother to meet you." On that note, the blue-eyed woman smiled and turned back toward the stairs. "And it's really good to see you again," she called as she slowly descended.

Finally assured that she wasn't hallucinating, Paula watched as Wynne made her way back to her mother's building. Her limp was much better, and she looked fabulous.

Think they'll get it right? [Part 6 \(conclusion\)](#)

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[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

~ Getting It Right ~

by KG MacGregor

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Thanks very much for reading, and please feel free to drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

**Part 6**

**Chapter 16**

Wynne scanned the complex anxiously as she waited to see if Paula would show. She'd seen the blonde woman from afar a couple of times in the evening as she went in and out of the condominium's fitness facility, then onto the jogging trail that circled the adjacent golf course.

The Labor Day picnic was underway, with more than a hundred residents and guests milling about between the pool and the clubhouse. The caterers had laid out a buffet line of salad, baked beans, chips, and corn on the cob. Two men watched over the grill, which was spread generously with hot dogs, hamburgers, and barbecued chicken.

"Tell me again what she looks like," Kitty asked. The elder Connelly was really looking forward to meeting this woman that had her daughter in such a state. After drawing closer to Wynne over the past year, she wanted her own assurances that this Paula McKenzie was nothing at all like Heather Bennett.

"She's...right there!" Wynne beamed with excitement as she watched the blonde woman bound down the steps toward the party. For some silly reason, it hadn't occurred to her that Paula would in fact know many of the people in attendance, and she was at first surprised to see her stop and greet one group after another. Eventually, she found her way to the table where the Connellys waited.

"Hi! I'm glad you could come." Wynne stood immediately and pulled another chair to their table.

"I try not to miss these things. It's a good chance to see my neighbors." Paula wanted to underscore the fact that she was planning to come anyway, and that Wynne's invitation had been unimportant. Turning toward the woman she assumed was Wynne's mother, Paula introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Paula McKenzie."

Wynne completed the introductions as the two women shook hands. Paula remained standing until the older woman insisted that she join them.

"So how do you like Orlando, Mrs. Connelly?"

"Please call me Kitty. After all, we're neighbors now. We like Orlando just fine, don't we Wynne?"

"Very much." *Epecially now.*

"I like it, too. I'm really glad to be back." Paula was quite deliberate about addressing her remarks to Kitty rather than Wynne. "And I like this complex too. The facilities are nice and the people are friendly. Do you like it here?"

"Oh, yes! The complex is very nice." Kitty recognized at once that Paula was avoiding her daughter altogether; it amused her to see the consternation on Wynne's face at being excluded from the conversation. But she wasn't about to let that happen indefinitely. "Wynne tells me that she met you at the hotel."

The brunette nearly choked at hearing her mother open that can of worms. And then there was Paula's reply!

"That's right. We used to be pretty good friends."

*Ouch!*

"Well, I know she's been very excited about you moving back to town. She hasn't made many new friends here, and I hate to think of her spending all that time by herself at home. It'll be nice

to see her start getting out."

Wynne's face burned with embarrassment at her mother's blatant insinuations.

Out of the blue, Kitty Connelly had put her finger on what it was about seeing Wynne again that was so unreal. She was...by herself! In all of the hours over the last week that Paula had spent thinking about the sudden invitation to this picnic, she hadn't once thought about the woman who had answered the phone in Baltimore.

Paula stood suddenly and stepped back from the table. "I should be going. I have something planned with my family, but I wanted to stop by and say hello. It was very nice meeting you, Mrs. Connelly."

"Call me Kitty. And it was nice meeting you. Wynne, if you want to walk your friend back to her place, I'll be fine here."

On cue, the red-faced woman stood and fell in beside their departing guest.

"Your mom is certainly subtle."

"Like multiple gunshot wounds," Wynne agreed sheepishly.

"You know, I know the way home. You don't have to walk with me." Paula had owned up to her demons when she'd come face to face with Wynne in Denver. As far as she was concerned, their brief talk that night in the Concierge lounge settled things between them for good. But seeing her again - at her own door, no less - had stirred emotions that she just couldn't identify.

"I know, but...I'd appreciate it if we could talk a little." Wynne shoved her hands in her pockets, slowing her gait in hopes that the shorter woman would do the same. Paula's demeanor today was far from warm and friendly, but at least she'd come to the party, and that counted for something.

"Fine," she answered noncommittally. "So I take it you live alone these days."

"Yes, I do. I split up with Heather right after I got back to Baltimore."

The blonde shot her a sideways glare.

"Yeah, I know. My timing left a lot to be desired."

"Well now, there's an understatement!"

Plainly, forging even a friendship was going to be a challenge. "Look, I know that you told me in Denver that it didn't really matter, but I want you to know that I'm really sorry I made such a mess of everything," the brunette started.

"You don't have to apologize," Paula answered, looking straight ahead as they walked.

"Then don't think of it as an apology. Think of it as a statement of how much I regret what I did because it caused me to lose your friendship, and because it cost me the chance to have even more than that. I know I should have spoken up, but I never really thought things would go that far between us."

"That's no excuse, Wynne. No matter what you thought would happen to us, you and I started out just being friends, and even friends would think to say something like 'Oh, and I live with someone back in Baltimore.' But you deliberately left that out. You told me about your mom, your sister, and your niece. Why not tell me about your girlfriend?"

That was a good point, Wynne thought. Why had she never mentioned it? "Paula...you and I started flirting with each other the first night we met. We were having fun. It was the first time in five years I could remember having fun with anybody." She heaved a big sigh, worried that she might be digging herself into a deeper hole. "Look, I'll say it again. What I did was wrong. I should have told you about Heather. But at the time, I didn't think there was any chance of you and me being anything more than friends."

"Hello! We had sex, Wynne! That was you, wasn't it?" Paula sneered sarcastically, still not looking at her companion.

"I didn't set out to have sex with you. I never thought it would go that far, honest to God."

"It never should have gone that far, and if you'd told me about this Heather, it wouldn't have. I'm not in the habit of borrowing someone else's girlfriend for a roll in the sack. And just so you know it, I don't happen to like to share either."

Wynne walked in silence for a few steps, acutely aware of the ache in her chest as she absorbed Paula's angry words. Was this how the term "heartbroken" had come about? But she forged ahead.

"Paula, everything I did was wrong, and I knew it. I told myself over and over that I shouldn't be spending time with you like that, and especially when I started to realize the feelings that were growing every time I came down here."

Paula looked at her in disbelief.

"That's right. And when I started feeling more for you than just friendship, I really knew it was wrong. By that time, I didn't want to stop. But I figured my job would end soon and both of us knew that would be the end of it. I never thought it would go that far. I lost control."

"So did I," Paula confessed.

"I wanted to try to set it all right, but you found out about Heather before I had a chance to tell you. And I would have told you. I realize how convenient that sounds, but it really is the truth."

"Did you tell Heather?"

"No. I hurt Heather enough just by asking her to move out. There was no reason to add to that."

"Would you have broken up with her if it hadn't been for me?"

"I hope I would have. Being with you sure showed me all that was missing from what she and I had. I was with Heather for all the wrong reasons, and if you and I can manage to be friends again, I'll tell you all about it someday. She's a good person; we just weren't right for each other. I hated hurting her, and I hated hurting you."

As they climbed the steps, neither woman spoke. Out of the corner of her eye, Paula watched the taller woman grimace as she grasped the rail and pulled herself up, obviously struggling to alternate her lead foot. That was a significant change from last time, she noted, when Wynne could only lead with her good leg.

"You had the surgery?"

"Yeah, about a year ago. I think this is as good as it gets."

"It looks like it's a lot better," she observed, wanting for some reason to both compliment and encourage this woman beside her. "Does it hurt much?"

"Not like it used to." They reached the landing and stopped. Wynne finally gathered her nerve to ask Paula for one small concession. "Look, I know I don't deserve your friendship, but if we can work it out to start over, I promise that I won't lie to you again."

Paula didn't respond at first; she wanted to choose her words very carefully to convey exactly how she felt. She turned and inserted the key in the door. Still not meeting the eyes of her companion, she answered sternly, "Wynne, you need to get it out of your head that we can ever 'start over.' We might be able to be friends someday - 'might' is the operative word - if I ever feel like I can trust you again, but we won't ever go down that other path. If that's what you've got in mind, do us both a big favor now and just let it go."

Despite all those qualifications, Paula's response was enough to keep the hope alive in Wynne. If they could be friends again, she'd find a way to show Paula that they could be more.

## Chapter 17



"I can't believe you scored these tickets" the hotel manager exclaimed. "All the home games are sold out."

"You just have to have the right connections," her tall companion answered smugly. And a fat checkbook, too, Wynne thought to herself. Ever since the Buccaneers won the Super Bowl, they were the hottest ticket in Florida. But some of Eldon-Markoff's agencies held tickets back that were part of travel packages, and the seats often became available at the last minute. Wynne knew this from having gone to a game last year with Cheryl and her husband.

"Well, anytime you get connected, count me in."

That settled that, as far as Wynne was concerned. She would put in for all the home games from now on if it meant Paula would come with her.

Climbing the stairs to their upper level seats in Raymond James Stadium, the women quickly became caught up in the game day excitement. Paula snagged a passing vendor and bought them each a hot dog and a cold draft beer in a souvenir cup, but Wynne wanted to hit the NFL gear stand so she could buy herself a team jersey.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Paula warned. She herself wore a cap and t-shirt that boasted the Buccaneers logo.

"Why not? Lots of people here are wearing them."

"I know, but you're taking a big chance. Not only are they 80 bucks, but as soon as you get one with a player's name on it, he's going to go and get arrested for beating his girlfriend. Then you have his name on your back."

"I see what you mean. So I'll get a t-shirt."

"That's a better idea. It's cheaper and generic. It only says that you endorse large men crashing into each other with the intent of causing bodily harm."

"But in an organized way," Wynne added seriously.

"But of course," Paula laughed.

Wynne was really happy with the way the day was going. It had taken her a while to get up the nerve to call, afraid that Paula would refuse, or worse, that she'd thought about their conversation and changed her mind about even trying to be friends. Things had started out awkwardly in the car, both women struggling a little with the conversation at first. But eventually, they settled down on the drive over to Tampa and lapsed into a casual discussion of the hotel business, the travel business, and the Bucs' chances of returning to the Super Bowl.

"Does it feel weird to be cheering against the Ravens?"

"A little," Wynne admitted, though she'd transferred her loyalties from the Baltimore team when she started following the Bucs. "I still pull for them when they're playing someone else, but the Bucs are my team now."

"I couldn't bring myself to pull for the Broncos in Denver. I think I knew I wasn't going to be there very long, so I didn't get too comfortable. Does that sound silly?"

"Not at all. I guess I'd have done the same thing. But I knew when I took the job in Orlando that it was going to be for the long haul, so I wanted to be a part of it. And when Mom moved down, it sealed the deal. We're Floridians now."

To Paula, that was almost surreal...but not as much as the fact that they were here together as budding friends after the anger and bitterness she'd felt just a year ago. Even more astonishing was the level of comfort they seemed to share, and how they'd slipped so easily into their friendly banter. It was a shame, Paula thought, that things between them had been forever ruined. Looking at her beautiful companion, it would be very easy to forget that she had insisted on nothing more than friendship. But that would be a mistake.

With the game in hand, the pair slipped out of the stadium early to beat the traffic. Not ready for the day to end, Paula offered to buy dinner and directed Wynne to Flanagan's, the sports bar in downtown Orlando where her friend Val worked. Elbowing their way through the crowded bar, the women claimed a tall round table and two bar stools.

"I'll go grab a couple of menus," the blonde offered. When she got back, she bristled at the sight of a handsome forty-ish man who had set his beer on their table and was already deep in conversation with the beautiful brunette. "Here you go," she interrupted unceremoniously, tossing the menu across the small table.

"Thanks. What's good here?"

Paula was about to answer when the self-perceived Don Juan jumped in. "I like the barbecue. Say, do you mind if we pull up a couple of extra stools? There seem to be lots of stools, but not many tables."

"Actually, if you'd like to have this table, we can move on over to the bar," Paula offered flatly.

Wynne turned away to shield the smile that crept onto her face. She was enjoying this.

"Well...no," he stammered. "You don't have to move. I think there's plenty of room here for all of us."

"I'm sure you're right, but my friend and I haven't seen each other in a long time, and we'd sort of like to talk...to each other." Paula waited to see if he would buy a clue.

He didn't answer right away, hoping that the dark-haired woman would overrule and invite him to stay.

Instead, she just smiled at the blonde and reached for her purse. "Two seats just opened up. If you hurry, we can grab them." In a flash, Paula was gone.

"Thank you," Paula said, pulling her stool up to the bar. I didn't want to deal with that today."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm a lesbian, too. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah." It wasn't likely Paula would forget that anytime soon.

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"So that's her, the woman from Baltimore that broke your heart...left you shattered in a million pieces...stomped on you and left you for dead..." Val sputtered between leg lifts.

"That's her, the one and only." Paula stood before the mirror working her triceps with the dumbbells.

"She seemed really nice."

"She is really nice."

"You never mentioned that she looked like a model."

"I told you she was beautiful."

"Yeah, but I thought those were just 'I'm in love' words. Everybody says that when they're in love. But she really is."

"Yep, she certainly is."

"So what were you guys arguing about?"

Paula chuckled. "The bill, actually."

"There had to be more to it than that. Most people don't get that angry when they're fighting over the bill."

The blonde woman sighed, setting the dumbbells back in the rack. "I was going to pick up the check because she got the tickets to the game. But she tried to pay it instead. She said she'd

invited me so she should pay."

"Sounds fair. Can't you just pay next time?"

"That wasn't the point. The point was that we're just friends. It wasn't supposed to be a date and she knew that, so I didn't want her picking up the tab saying it was because she'd asked me out. You and I wouldn't have had any argument at all. We'd have split everything down the middle because that's what friends do."

"Sounds to me like you're making a pretty big deal out of nothing. So what if she wanted to pay? So what if it was a date? You did spend the whole day together, and you're both attracted to each other." That much was obvious to the bar manager by just the way the women looked at each other.

"We're not attracted to each other. We were, but that's in the past." Paula couldn't honestly deny that the attraction was still there, but saying it was in the past helped to harden her resolve. "You and I go places together and we don't call it a date. I'm not interested in playing with that fire anymore, thank you."

"Could've fooled me," Val muttered.

"What?"

"If you're not interested, why do you go out with her at all?"

"Because she's nice. Because I like her. Because she's fun."

"So what's the problem with calling it a date? It's obvious that you two have chemistry together."

"Val, I can't go there again! I don't trust her after what she did."

"Are you sure you're not just punishing her?"

"What difference does it make? Either way, I'm not going to give her the chance to do it again."

"But it does make a difference. Do you think she's just that kind of person, or do you think she just made a mistake?"

Paula shrugged. "How can you separate the two? Only a certain kind of person makes a mistake like that, and if she'll do it once, who's to say she won't do it again? I mean, what if we got together and then she went off on one of her business trips and met somebody else?"

"People aren't perfect, Paula. But some of them are able to learn from their mistakes."

The blonde woman reached again for the dumbbells to complete her final set. "It's just... I know now that Wynne Connelly has the power to hurt me a lot if I let her too close."

"Look, I don't blame you for being wary after what happened. But any time you start to care for somebody, you give them the power to hurt you. It's a risk you have to weigh. And in this case, I think you really ought to ask yourself if this woman's worth another chance."

Paula returned the dumbbells to the rack and turned for the door. "Are you ready to run?" The discussion was now closed.

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Wynne flipped on the kitchen lights with her elbow as she stumbled into the dark house from the garage. With a sharp tug, she rolled her suitcase over the threshold, the wheels clacking across the tile floor. She'd have two days in her office before her next trip, this one to San Francisco on Sunday afternoon. Cheryl had underestimated the amount of travel for her job, but that was due in part to the fact that she'd started helping out in sales.

It sure didn't leave much time for nesting, she thought. And after more than a year, she really hadn't bonded with her new house. It was a nice place, but after all this time, the only furniture she owned was her bedroom suite. At her insistence, her mom had moved the other one to the new condo for guests.

Another factor in play was that she'd been spending so much time at her mom's place that it felt more like home than her own house. If she had it to do over again, she'd have gotten a three-bedroom condo herself, and turned one of the rooms into an office. She really liked the feeling of having such a variety of neighbors living close by.

The last two days in Miami had been busy, but fruitful, as she worked with Eldon-Markoff's cruise partner to draft a winter campaign. She was working these days with a lot of autonomy, except on the San Francisco project. That one involved three of the corporate officers, including Cheryl and Wendell.

Despite her exhausted state, Wynne loved her job more every day. It was turning out to be everything she'd hoped it would be: challenging, fun, interesting, and she was lucky to find herself working with a team of people she really liked. Indeed, she could see herself at Eldon-Markoff for many years. Cheryl had cautioned her over and over not to let the job become her life. Sure, it was demanding work, her boss had said. But she needed something different to go home to, something comforting, and without the stress of the workplace. A different house, perhaps, Wynne imagined, knowing even as the thought registered that it would take much more than a house to fill the void in her life - a void she might never have acknowledged had she not found Paula McKenzie again.

Kicking off her shoes, the tired executive entered her living room and turned on a lamp. A quick

check of the front porch yielded two newspapers and a small stack of mail...junk mail mostly, and a couple of bills. The dial tone on her phone pulsed to announce new messages. To her surprise and delight, the third one was from Paula.

*Hi, Wynne. It's me. Look, I was wondering if you'd be interested in going to a shuttle launch at the press site next week. I know you probably have to work, but it's scheduled for Friday at 12:35 p.m. If you're interested, I need you to call me with your full name, your social security number, and your date of birth. Of course, this could just be a hoax and I need that information to clean out your bank account. Either way, can I count on your cooperation? So long.*

Wynne fought the urge to call right away. It wasn't quite 11, but she knew that Paula's morning shift started at seven. She was probably already asleep.

More than anything, Wynne was thrilled at this, the first invitation she'd gotten from Paula since their talk of friendship after the picnic on Labor Day. Her plane from California was due back in on Thursday night, and she made a decision on the spot to take a personal day if it cleared with Cheryl.

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Paula pulled up to the gate and passed the guard two sets of press credentials and identification. The soldier recognized her as Ray McKenzie's daughter and knew that she wasn't officially employed by a media agency. Still, the head of public information had cleared her and the beautiful woman beside her, and he wasn't going to question McKenzie's authority.

As the long flat road continued forward past a line of trees, a giant structure appeared in the distance.

"What's that?"

"That's the Vehicle Assembly Building, where they...?"

"Assemble vehicles?"

Paula laughed. "That's right. That's where they attach the rockets and get the shuttle ready to mount on the launch pad. That building's so big that it has its own weather inside."

Wynne looked perplexed.

"Well, not really. But the condensation gathers at the top and when it gets heavy enough, it falls just like rain."

Wynne was still skeptical, not so much because the story lacked credence, but because she wouldn't put it past Paula to pull her leg. "How do they move it from there to the launch pad?"

"It goes on a giant bed with treads like a tank. And the road isn't paved, because it would just collapse under all that weight. Instead, it's made out of crushed seashells because they give a little. But every time they move one of the shuttles out there they have to rebuild the road for next time. The worst is if the window closes and they have to bring it back in and take it apart."

"Wow! That sounds like a lot of work."

"Believe me, they hate it." Paula pulled into the field and cruised the rows until she found a space to accommodate her small convertible. Among the two hundred or so autos were a couple of dozen press trucks, easily identified by the satellite dishes affixed to their tops.

A grandstand looked across an open area to the launch pad. Wynne noticed at once the familiar view of the large digital clock and the flagpole in the foreground. Just past those landmarks was water and marsh, wetlands that were home to thousands of birds, fish and reptiles. Seven miles away was the shuttle Endeavor.

"My dad works in here," Paula said, leading the way to a dome-shaped building that hosted rows of press terminals, walls of charts, racks of brochures, and speakers that carried every official word of the launch process. Ray McKenzie sat behind a desk in a glassed-in cubicle, his raised finger indicating to Paula that his interview was nearly complete. "We should wait here."

Ray McKenzie had gotten the lowdown from his wife that this was a woman who had recently moved to Orlando, and that she and Paula had a history. He didn't want all the details; it was enough to him that Maxine had told him to be especially nice to this one because their daughter liked Wynne Connelly very much.

"I'm glad you could come today. Did either of you have any trouble getting off work?"

"I didn't," Paula answered. "I traded tomorrow, though."

"I didn't either. I haven't had a day off in months, so I dared anyone to try to stop me," Wynne explained. "Mr. McKenzie, thank you for getting me in today. This is something I won't forget."

"Call me Ray, please. Paula told me you understood what things here at NASA were really about, so I was glad to do it."

"What's the status, Dad?"

"It looks like 'all systems go' and we're less than an hour away. The weather looks great. I'd say

we're going to launch."

"That's great. Hey, I think we're going to go out to the grandstand. We'll come back in after she goes up, okay?"

"Okay, have fun."

Before going out, Wynne picked up some of the brochures and press releases so she'd know a little about the crew before the launch. Once on the grandstand, the women read interesting tidbits to each other until the clock announced T minus five minutes.

"Let's go to the edge of the water to watch it go up." Contractors were already lining up on the bank.

A loudspeaker announced the final 30 seconds. The first sign of the launch was a large mountain of white smoke at the base of the launch pad. The mountain grew rapidly wider, but only slightly higher. The shuttle's first movement was barely perceptible.

As the rumble reached their outpost, hundreds of birds took to the air from the glades in front of them. The water rippled fiercely as the whole earth shook.

"It's cleared the launch pad," Paula shouted. "That means it's gone over to Mission Control in Houston."

The shuttle appeared to hang in the sky momentarily, then its climb began to accelerate rapidly. Wynne too was shaking in anticipation as the shuttle turned on its back and arced to trace a path directly above their heads. In less than three minutes, it was beyond the naked eye.

"Paula, that was so awesome!"

"I know. It gets me every single time."

Finally, they turned to walk back toward the dome. Journalists and photographers were collecting their gear, ready to file their launch stories.

"You know, this is why I called that night," Paula said softly.

"What?"

"That night in Baltimore, when Heather answered the phone. I was calling to see if you could come to a launch that weekend. I had to know the next day to get your credentials."

Wynne shuddered at the memory. Neither woman said another word as they walked into the domed offices in search of Paula's dad. Both said their polite goodbyes and walked quietly to the convertible.



Paula was feeling pretty bad about bringing up the call to Baltimore. She'd been having a good time, and it seemed like Wynne had too. Things between them had been light, friendly, and even casual. Now the dark-haired woman pulled a cap low over her forehead as they started out, looking off to right at the scenery on her own side of the car.

"I guess I shouldn't have brought that up, huh?" Paula asked sheepishly.

Wynne blew out a breath of resignation. "I deserved it, I suppose."

"No, you didn't. We already settled all that and I should have just let it go."

"Well, one thing is pretty obvious, Paula. You haven't forgiven me for it," she said sadly. "That's going to make it pretty hard for us to be real friends."

Wynne was right, Paula knew. It wasn't enough just to go through the motions of doing things together. They connected every time they talked, and they had a real chance of being close friends for a long time...but not if Paula couldn't get past her feelings about what had happened. It wasn't going to be good for them if she continued her punishment.

"I...I do want to forgive you, Wynne. I haven't been as honest with you as I've asked you to be with me," she confessed. "What happened between us really hurt me a lot. I felt cheap and used, and I was angry for a long time, but not just at you. I was angry at myself for being such a fool in the first place, and I was angry at every woman I met at the hotel for a whole year afterwards." Paula looked over to find her companion pushing away tears. She understood that such declarations were tough to listen to.

"I'm so sorry."

"I know. I believe you when you say that. But I've been carrying this around for awhile and it's going to take a little longer to get past all of it." On the spot, Paula made a decision and announced her intention. "I'm going to try harder, okay? I really did have fun with you today, and I want us to be able to keep doing things together without having something between us."

"Thank you. I'm really glad to have you back in my life, Paula. I want us to be friends again." At that point, Wynne wanted to reach over and cover the small hand on the gearshift, but the potential for rejection was higher than she was willing to risk.

## Chapter 18

"Excuse me, Wynne?"

Claudia Sanchez, Markoff's administrative assistant, stood in her doorway.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Markoff wants a meeting right now with all the officers and assistant VPs. We're linking up Cheryl and Wendell by speaker phone."

"I'll be right there."

Moments later, the tall woman joined the caravan of busy executives as they filed into the conference room. All had dropped what they were doing to answer the urgent summons of their CEO.

Ken Markoff opened the meeting with two announcements: Eldon-Markoff would acquire San Francisco-based Western Travel, a smaller company with a solid network of Asian contacts. Most of the executives, including Wynne, had been working quietly behind the scenes to evaluate the potential for such an acquisition, so only a few were surprised.

Markoff's second announcement was startling. Effective immediately, Cheryl Williams was leaving her post as VP of Sales and Marketing to assume the title of President of Eldon-Markoff, the number two position in the company. Ken Markoff had held both posts for several years, ever since the death of David Eldon.

One after another, the executives around the table passed on their congratulations to the new president, who was actually on a cell phone in a cab heading to JFK International Airport. Wynne learned from Cheryl that successful business people made the most of every minute.

"I really appreciate all of your votes of confidence. I'll stop by your offices and thank you in person when I get back tomorrow. But right now, I need to cut this short." Her cab had arrived at curbside.

Markoff adjourned the meeting with an admonition not to talk to anyone outside the room about the proceedings until the formal notification and press release tomorrow. The Federal Trade Commission frowned heavily on the passing of insider information that might allow a privileged few to capitalize on the stock market.

"Wynne, can I see you in my office for a few minutes?" he asked.

"Of course." She was already thinking about how this move would impact her workload. Until they got a new VP in place, she'd probably have to absorb more of the sales administration; she was already handling virtually all of the marketing.

Once inside the plush corner office, Markoff closed the door and offered her a chair. Buzzing

Claudia, he asked her to put the call through.

"Wynne, this is Cheryl again."

That was odd, the assistant VP thought. But evidently, Ken and Cheryl had worked out the quick adjournment and had planned this call in advance.

"I'm here. Congratulations again."

"Thanks, and congratulations yourself. If you say yes, you're going to be the new Vice President for Sales and Marketing."

Wynne was flabbergasted, and surprised herself by not falling out of the chair! "Yes!"

"That's wonderful, Wynne." Markoff stood to extend a hug. Wynne had rapidly become one of his favorite staffers.

"Thank you. Thank you both. I promise not to disappoint either of you."

"We already knew that. That's why we asked. Listen, I have to go through security, so I'll see everyone in the morning."

"Safe travels, Cheryl."

The new VP turned to her CEO to reiterate her thanks. "Those are some tough shoes to follow, but I promise to do my best."

"They are, Wynne, but we all believe you're the right person for the job."

Walking back to her office, she almost couldn't believe it. The first thing she wanted to do was to call Paula and share the great news. They'd been getting together a couple of times a week for almost a month to go to the movies, out to eat, and even to a couple of NBA games. Bit by bit, they'd moved into a casual, comfortable friendship. Swinging into her swivel chair, Wynne tapped the speed dial feature, #1, her own private joke. It was after six o'clock, so she was pretty sure her friend was home.

"Hello."

"Hi there. It's Wynne. Look, I know it's short notice but I got some good news today. How about having dinner with me so I can tell somebody about it before I explode?"

"Uh...I can't tonight. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Aw, come on. We'll go wherever you say and we'll get back early."

"I can't, Wynne," she paused, checking through the blinds for an unfamiliar car. "I sort of...have

a date."

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What the hell does "sort of have a date" mean, Wynne wondered. You did or you didn't. It was or it wasn't.

Under other circumstances, she would have gone straight to her mother's place after work to deliver the good news, but wild horses couldn't drag her to that complex tonight. She didn't want to be anywhere near Paula and her "sort of date."

Instead, she pulled out her notes on the Western Travel merger and began to draft a plan for incorporating their current marketing assets into those of Eldon-Markoff. There was sufficient equity in the Western brand to warrant a gradual co-branded campaign.

The new VP completely lost track of time as she worked. The outer offices had been dark and empty for hours, and the lone lamp on her desk kept her from seeing the figure fill her doorway.

"This is just ridiculous, Wynne!" Cheryl Williams barked angrily.

Startled, the executive jumped back from her desk, knocking a pile of papers into the floor. "God, you scared me!"

"It's after 10 o'clock. Even the cleaning crew is long gone. What the hell are you doing here that can't wait until tomorrow?"

"I'm...I've started to work on the co-branding plan for Western."

"Maybe you didn't hear my question. What part of that can't wait until tomorrow?"

In all her time at Eldon-Markoff, Wynne had never seen Cheryl so angry, at least not at her. "I just started on it and things were falling into place. I didn't realize it was so late." Suddenly it occurred to her that her accuser was in the same boat. "So what are you doing here so late?"

"Nice try. I'm dropping off the paperwork for the press release so I can sleep in tomorrow." Cheryl was bemused at the almost frightened look on the face of her charge as she dragged a chair around the desk and sat down, effectively pinning her quarry in her seat. "Look, Wynne, I've said this to you a dozen times. I think your work is wonderful. I also think you're capable of getting it done during regular hours. I really want you in this VP slot, but not if it means that Eldon-Markoff's going to take center stage in your life. That's not good for you, and in the long run, it isn't good for us either."

Wynne nodded in resignation to let her boss know that she was getting the message.

"Look around. You don't see any of the other officers here after six-thirty or seven at night. Everybody goes home to their real lives, the ones that matter. Didn't you tell me you were seeing somebody?"

"That...didn't work out."

Despite Wynne's attempts to conceal her emotions, Cheryl picked up on the disappointment in her voice. "I'm sorry, Wynne. Really, I am. But if you're trying to bury yourself in work so you won't feel lonely, I can promise you that it won't help. It'll just make it worse and one day you'll look back on it and wonder why you gave your soul to this place. Now I don't tell many people this, but my husband and I nearly split up when I came to work here because I didn't know when to come home. I thank God every day that I listened to him because we found a way to make it all work out. In the end, I got what I wanted here, and I got what I really wanted at home."

Wynne slowly closed her folder and pulled her purse from the bottom drawer. "Okay, Cheryl. Let's go home."

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Paula listened with interest as Dee Hobart walked her through how she had set up her own law practice after leaving a harried job as associate in one of Orlando's largest firms. Her date was attractive, a slender woman, smartly dressed in black slacks with a tunic top. Her short red hair was perfectly coiffed, locked into place with what Paula thought was a little too much "product." She couldn't help but wonder if Dee thought her under-dressed for the occasion, as she wore a simple dress, having merely combed her soft blonde hair.

"My old firm would take on the occasional *pro bono* case if it was something that might get them good press. Their favorite was property cases against the government because that kind of thing - almost anything against the government, in fact - made them look good to most of their clients. But you'd never see them pick up the mantle on a criminal case, or God help us all, if it was about a gay issue. I just got sick of it, so I got out."

"That was a pretty brave thing to do," Paula offered, genuinely impressed. She'd met Dee at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, and found herself working alongside the attorney on the Minority Affairs committee. The meeting room was almost pinging as both women acknowledged that their respective "gaydar" was in working order. Paula wasn't surprised at all at the invitation, though she would rather have done something more casual than the country club restaurant Dee had chosen.

"So tell me what you like about the hotel business."

Paula went on to talk about her job, how she'd started at the WR right out of college and worked her way to her current position. Dee listened intently, interrupting from time to time ask questions or add comments.

Dinner progressed, and as they returned to the car, Paula felt that all in all she'd had a pretty good time. Dee was fun...and attractive...and attentive...and interesting...and despite all that, she felt no spark at all between them. She knew that was an unfair assessment at this stage; they didn't even know each other. But first impressions on the arousal scale were usually pretty reliable for her, and this one was barely registering at all.

Wynne Connelly, on the other hand, had been completely off the scale. Even as friends, the beautiful woman triggered a sensual response. Paula scolded herself inwardly. Here she was out on her first date in over a year and she was comparing the woman she was with to someone else.

"...don't you think?"

Paula was caught off-guard. Dee had been talking about something having to do with the hotel, while she'd been seeing images of Wynne looking up at her from between her legs. In no time, she'd gone from feeling nothing to feeling more aroused than she had in months. Only Dee Hobart hadn't done that.

Val was right. Wynne Connelly had it all, and she was worth another chance.

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"Wynne, Paula McKenzie is calling on one," Denise announced.

The VP braced herself for the call, not knowing how she'd react to hearing Paula's voice, this the first call since the "date" last week.

"Hello, this Wynne Connelly," she said formally.

"Hi! Listen, I just talked to the Concierge. He has a couple of tickets to the Magic-Lakers game tonight. You interested?"

Normally, Wynne would have jumped at the opportunity to do anything with Paula, but the idea that the woman was now "dating" someone else made her start to question if even a friendship was going to work. She didn't want to be close enough to watch Paula fall in love with somebody else.

"I, uh...I have to go to San Francisco."

"You leave tonight?"

"No, day after tomorrow. But I have a lot to do before I go, so I'd better not."

"Aw, come on. You know you want to," Paula coaxed. Ever since her dinner with Dee Hobart, Paula had been trying to think of how she and Wynne might get back on track. They seemed to have finally gotten past their old business, and after her date, she was sure it was time to let the executive know that the door was opening for more.

"I can't, Paula."

"Okay, maybe a rain check. When do you get back?"

"Friday night."

"I think they're on the road next week. Want to do something else?"

"I can't say right now. Things at work are pretty crazy with the new acquisition."

"Oh yeah? I didn't hear. What was it?"

"We bought up that agency in San Francisco we'd been looking at for so long. It was in the paper." As were other things.

That must have been the big news Wynne had wanted to share last week. "Well, congratulations, I guess. Will you call me when you get back?"

"Sure."

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"Are you pulling another double shift?" Jolene was surprised but immensely pleased to see her former supervisor behind the front desk.

"No, but I promised to cover for Belinda until six. She had a parent-teacher conference this afternoon. Speaking of Belinda...has that situation gotten any better?"

Jolene thought about it, and finally confessed, "Yeah, now that you mention it, it has. After she took that week off, she just came back a whole different person."

"Sometimes, all you need is a little time away," Paula concurred. Belinda's "time away" had

come in the form of a personnel management seminar in New York. Paula and Stephanie had determined that retraining was the last hope and if Belinda didn't get it, she'd likely be demoted and transferred.

"I think it made a real difference. Maybe I should have a week off and see if it improves my attitude," she joked.

Paula masterfully raised a single eyebrow before laughing. "Oh no, it doesn't work that way. What is that old saying? 'The floggings will continue until morale improves.'"

"Yeah, that sounds like a corporate policy, alright."

"Listen, while we're not busy, I'm going to clean out this cabinet," the manager said, indicating the space under the counter between the terminals. "You watch the desk."

Pulling out a trashcan, Paula began to extract wayward items from the shelves below. Her haul included several cell phone adapters and laptop power cords; loose batteries; an empty backpack; a half dozen registration packets from conferences held months ago; and a stack of old newspapers.

"How does all this stuff get in here?"

"If I were guessing, I'd say people bring it to the desk when we're busy and everyone forgets about it," Jolene explained.

"That's probably right. Who reads all these newspapers at the front desk?" she asked with irritation.

"I don't know. Maybe the guys on third shift. Hey, isn't that the woman that used to come here?" Jolene grabbed a section of the paper Paula was pulling out.

"Now, don't you start!"

"Well, isn't it?" The desk clerk turned the paper around to show Paula the picture of K. Wynne Connelly.

"I'll be damned...that's what it was!" Rapidly reading the announcement of the promotion to vice president, she now remembered that Wynne had wanted to share some big news last week. Instead, she'd gone out that night with Dee. But why hadn't Wynne said anything since?

Jolene hadn't realized that a former guest's promotion would be such big news to her mentor, but she remembered the gossip from when Paula used to drop her off at the hotel late at night. "She's a friend of yours, right?"

"Yeah, she moved here while I was in Denver." Paula wasn't about to offer any more. Rusty confirmed for her before the move that some of the employees were speculating about her and



the Baltimore guest. She hoped they would have forgotten.

"Maybe you should give her a call and congratulate her."

"Good idea," she agreed without looking up. She would do more than call.

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"No, I get back on Friday night, Mom. It'll be late...sure, I'll stop by on Saturday." Wynne knew she'd have to suck it up sooner or later and make an appearance in the condo complex. She'd avoided coming by over the weekend on the off chance that Paula would be there with her sort-of date. "Mom, I need to go. There's someone at the door...I don't know who it is, but I need to answer it. I'll call when I get back in town, okay?"

Wynne lowered the flame underneath the soup she was heating and hurried to the front door. She wasn't expecting company, but the neighbors' kids stopped by from time to time to sell things for school fundraisers, and that's what she figured this would be. Instead, she found the hotel manager - still dressed in her uniform - leaning against the pillar on the porch, her arms crossed in an accusing posture and a folded newspaper in her hand.

"Can you believe this? One of my best friends got promoted to vice president and I had to read it in the newspaper!"

"Come on in, Paula." Wynne stood aside as the irate blonde stomped into her living room.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was going to, but you were busy."

"I haven't been busy every night, and we've talked on the phone three or four times...." She stopped herself. "Wait a minute! You're angry about me going out on a date, aren't you?"

"I'm not angry about anything, Paula. You have every right to do what you please." She wouldn't meet the questioning green eyes.

"But that's what this is about, isn't it?" Her tone changed subtly from one of accusation to something more...compassionate.

Wynne didn't answer; instead, she walked back into the kitchen to turn off the burner. "You want some soup and crackers?"

"No, I want you to answer me."

The tall woman sighed as she turned around, crossing her own arms this time as she leaned on the counter. "What right do I have to be angry, Paula? You told me you weren't going to go there with me again, but I hoped you might change your mind. I'm not angry, but it..." She shook her head and sighed. *It breaks my heart.*

Paula's heart went out to Wynne as she watched her struggle with her emotions. "Wynne, I..."

Wynne cut her off. She needed to get this out while she still had her nerve. "I wanted you to start trusting me again. I can't...I can't just let go of you, Paula."

This time, Paula sighed. "I know," she nodded, "I've been thinking about it too."

"Thinking about what?"

"About you and me...about whether or not we can put the past in the past and give this all another chance."

Wynne's heart was racing at what she was hearing. Was Paula really saying they had a chance?

Paula moved across the kitchen and held out her arms, pulling the tall woman close. "You scare me half to death, Wynne."

Wynne squeezed her tightly. "I love you. Please don't be afraid."

"You love me?"

"Yes," Wynne whispered, finally touching the mouth she'd missed for so long. She could feel the smaller woman relax in her arms, returning the kiss with all the intensity of their first time. Memories of their night together roared back and the brunette forcibly calmed herself, breaking the kiss but not the embrace. "I do love you, Paula."

Paula's heart pounded at the simple words. All of her willpower evaporated as her hands reached underneath the long shirt to feel the warm skin on Wynne's back. Just as they'd done before, both women were about to lose control.

## **Chapter 19**

"Where's your bedroom?" Paula asked, already working the buttons on Wynne's shirt.

Wynne couldn't believe what was happening as she led the woman she loved down the darkened hallway.

Moments later, both women were stripped to their waists and Paula was tossing her clothes over the trunk at the foot of the bed. Now naked, she stopped to stroke Wynne's breasts, which gleamed white against her tanned skin.

The taller woman responded by pushing her back onto the kind-sized bed, standing again to rid herself of her slacks and thong in one fluid move, gloriously reminiscent of the last time they did this.

Slowly, Wynne crawled onto the bed, settling her body between the smaller woman's thighs. She could feel Paula open as feet wrapped around and came to rest on her calves. Resting her elbows beside Paula's shoulders, she lowered her lips for a kiss.

"I haven't been with anyone since you," the blonde whispered.

Wynne thought her heart would explode with that knowledge. She wouldn't have asked the question for a million dollars. "I haven't either."

"Not even Heather?"

"No, no one." Dipping her head, she tenderly nibbled the soft skin below Paula's ear. "How could I?"

Wynne shifted her body to the side so she could run her hand up and down Paula's nude form. The breasts, the hips, the silky blonde curls were all just as she remembered them, just as she had envisioned them so many nights alone in her bed. She lowered her head, sucking a taut nipple into her mouth as her hands wandered to the soft insides of Paula's thighs.

"Go inside me, Wynne," the blonde woman pleaded. She didn't want to wait - she was ready now!

Wynne's thoughts of savoring the moment flew out the window with the command. Sliding her fingers through the wet folds, she pressed inside.

"God, yes!" Paula rocked her whole body against the plunging fingers, her hands subconsciously squeezing Wynne's shoulders in the same rhythm.

The brunette slipped her other arm underneath the writhing woman and pulled her close. Her own center ground against Paula's thigh, and she would peak soon. "I love you," she gasped as her climax began. Closing her eyes tightly, she fought to concentrate on her hand inside her lover. *There!* She felt the contraction as Paula stiffened in her arms.

"Annnnhhh!" The guttural sound came out like a cross between a scream and a moan. Slowly, the smaller woman lowered herself to the bed, her throbbing center still gripping the fingers inside.

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"I've missed you," Paula said, her voice low and serious. Gently, she trailed her fingers across her lover's prominent collarbone, dipping from time to time to the valley between her breasts. The lovers had spent more than two hours getting reacquainted and now lay temporarily sated.

"Me too. But it's all just as wonderful as I remember it, only better." Instantly, Wynne regretted her words, knowing where they would lead.

"Better? What's better?"

The brunette sighed. "Just knowing that there's a tomorrow this time, I guess."

"I hope there is." Paula nestled closer. "I like this."

Wynne relaxed, glad she was getting a reprieve. Her relief, though, didn't last.

"And this time, you don't have to feel guilty about anything."

Wynne shuddered uncomfortably as she planted a small apologetic kiss on the blonde head. "That's right."

"Can I ask you a question?" Paula felt the tension emanating from her lover's body. She didn't want this to be a confrontation, but she needed to know that things really were different this time. Wynne had used the "L" word, and she needed to trust that before deciding for herself that there really would be a tomorrow for them.

"Okay."

"You said that someday you would tell me about Heather. Did you...fall out of love with her?"

She wants to talk about this *now*? "No, I really wasn't in love with her to begin with."

"But you lived together, right?"

"Yeah, but it was...complicated."

Paula raised up on her elbow so she could see her lover's face. "I really need to hear about it,

Wynne."

Of course she did. Wynne blew out a deep breath, thinking about where to begin. "I met Heather right before my accident and we went out a couple of times, but I didn't feel like things were going anywhere between us. Then when I had my accident, she was there in the hospital when I woke up; she moved into my house to take care of me; and she was with me all through the surgeries and the rehab. We got to be really good friends through it all. Once I let her do all that stuff for me, I owed her so much."

"So you became lovers?"

"It was all she wanted. And I tried to be that for her but I couldn't. You can't just will your heart to love somebody." She searched the green eyes for understanding, for acceptance. "Just like you can't will your heart not to love somebody else."

"Did you ever tell her that you loved her?"

Wynne nodded. "And I did...but it was more of a friendship kind of love. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so," she sighed heavily. "But I'd be lying if I said it didn't worry me a little that you betrayed her. I mean, she didn't know that all you felt was friendship, right?"

"Right," Wynne conceded. "And I understand your doubts, really I do. But what I feel for you is different, Paula. It's so much more, and it has been, almost from the very beginning." She had hoped Paula could see this for herself in the way they'd made love. "This all feels like what it's supposed to be, and if anything, it just shows me what all was missing from my relationship with Heather."

"It's like we're supposed to do this, and nothing else works." That's how Paula understood it, but her doubts weren't going to go away overnight. Still, she wanted this with Wynne; she wanted to someday be confident that it was real and that she could trust her lover completely.

"That's exactly what it's like."

"You're not going to believe this, but I have to be at work in about six hours." Monday's uniform lay crumpled at the foot of the bed.

"Lucky you. I have to be on a plane at 6:30, and I'm not even packed."

"I should go." Slowly, she extricated her limbs from Wynne's and rose from the bed.

Wynne watched from the bed as her lover got dressed, then pulled back the covers and climbed out of bed. She couldn't let Paula leave with her words of doubt still hanging in the air. Tying her robe around her waist, she moved behind the shorter woman and wrapped her arms around her middle. "I really do love you."

"I believe you."

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For the second time in the last 10 minutes, Cheryl saw her colleague's chin dip as she fought to stay awake. "Ms. Connelly, would you like some coffee, or would you prefer that I just sit here quietly for a while and let you catch a nap?" The twinkle in her eye told Wynne that she was teasing.

Wynne shook her head and sat up straight, unhooking her seatbelt so that she could stretch. "I didn't get much sleep. I should probably have another cup of coffee."

"You weren't up working on this, were you?"

"No," Wynne answered, unable to suppress the blush and the smile as she thought back to her evening with Paula.

"Oh, now that's an interesting look," Cheryl teased as the VP's face turned redder. "I do believe you've met someone."

"Actually," her smile broadened as she thought again of her evening, "it's the same person I mentioned before. I think we're going to work things out."

"That's great news, Wynne. You want to tell me about her?"

"She's...her name's Paula, and she's the ops manager at the Weller Regent."

"Is that...? Wait a minute...you've been seeing her for awhile, haven't you? I remember Ken saying something about running into the two of you at Jack Elam's, but that was before you ever moved down here."

"Wow, there really aren't any secrets at Eldon-Markoff, are there?"

"Hey, I told you from Day 1: We're a family. You should bring her to the Christmas party next week."

"You think it would be alright?"

"Of course! I want to meet this woman! If she doesn't come to the party, I'm going to have to show up at her house!"

Wynne laughed aloud at that image, wondering whether Paula would rather face a holiday party or a one-on-one with her boss. "I'll ask her."

"Good. Now why don't you take a nap? I'll wake you up when we start to land."

The tired executive didn't need to be asked twice. In just a few minutes, she was sound asleep.

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For the hundredth time that day, Paula caught herself daydreaming and shook herself to snap out of it. Wynne was due back home tonight. They had spoken by phone several times over the week, each tentatively confirming with the other that they were headed in the right direction.

The hotel had been relatively quiet over the last two weeks, the drop-off in holiday business travel evident from the near-empty lounge and restaurant. This gave the staff an opportunity to catch up on end-of-year paperwork and to get the jump on spring cleaning. In three short weeks, their conference season would be in full swing.

From her small windowed office, Paula could see Stephanie across the hall behind her desk. Something big was going on - she could tell by the serious look on the hotel director's face. Her boss had been on the phone for most of the afternoon. Whatever it was, they would all know soon enough.

Paula debriefed with Belinda and Jon, the new Senior Shift Manager, as they started their shift. Ten more minutes and she was out of here for the next four days.

"Paula, can I see you in my office?" Stephanie's face was grave.

"Of course." Paula followed her inside, and the hotel director closed the door.

"I've been on the phone all day with Vince Tolliver."

## **Chapter 20**

Wynne hurried off the plane to the taxi stand, rolling her bag behind her. She had planned to head home for a shower before calling Paula, but the message on her cell phone suggested that she come straight from the airport. Paula "needed to talk" and that had the executive's stomach in knots. What could be wrong?

Wynne paid the cabbie and dragged her bag up the stairs to the second-floor condo. She hoped her mother wasn't watching out the window; she hadn't planned to see her until tomorrow.

"Hi." Paula held open the door and reached out to take the suitcase. "Was it a good trip?"

Wynne nodded nervously. No hug? No kiss?

As if in answer, Paula wrapped her arms around the tall woman and pulled her close. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"Come and sit down. You must be tired. Are you hungry?"

Wynne took a seat on the couch. "No, I ate on the plane. What's up? You said we needed to talk." They had talked each night on the phone and everything seemed fine.

"I got some big news today, but I didn't want to talk about it over the phone," the blonde started as she sat down.

"Oh yeah?" Wynne reached out absently to scratch the passing Slayer.

"You remember I told you about the guy that I worked for in Denver, Vince Tolliver?"

"You mean the one who got mad because Stephanie recruited you to come back?"

"That's the one." Paula grabbed the cat and pulled him into her lap. "He called Stephanie today and he wants to return the favor."

"What favor?"

"He's just gotten the director's job at the Weller Regent in San Francisco, and he wants me as his Senior Operations Manager. It's the number two job in the hotel."

All of a sudden, Wynne felt nauseous. She couldn't compete at all with an offer like that. "So you'd leave again." It wasn't a question.

"It's a really big promotion, Wynne. I could be running my own hotel in two years. If I stay here, it'll be seven years before Stephanie retires."

Wynne nodded her understanding, all the while frowning at the implications. "What did you tell



them?"

"I have to let them know on Wednesday. I haven't really made up my mind."

Wynne waited to hear more, but obviously Paula expected her to react to the news. Finally she answered. "I don't want you to go, Paula. I feel like we just found each other again after being lost for a really long time."

"I know," she agreed quietly. "It'll only be for a couple of years, Wynne. We can still see each other. I've got four weeks vacation; my work schedule lets me off four days in a row."

"But what happens in two years? If things work out like you say, you'll get your own hotel and you'll go somewhere else." She shook her head in resignation.

Paula nudged Slayer off her lap and dropped to her knees, scooting over to kneel in front of the flustered woman. "I haven't made up my mind yet. But I'd like to think that you and I could still have something no matter what I decide."

Wynne tugged her gently and Paula turned and climbed onto the couch, leaning back as the long arms wrapped around her waist. For the longest time, they sat without talking.

Wynne couldn't believe this turn of events. Everything she wanted had been within her grasp; now it was slipping away. But if Paula were to pass up this opportunity in order to be with her, it was really no different from what Heather had done. Wynne would always owe her, and she didn't want Paula to ever wonder if the debt was what made her stay.

"Paula?"

"Hmmm?"

"What if...?"

"What if what?"

"What if I came to San Francisco too?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what if I asked Eldon-Markoff to move me to the new agency out there? I probably wouldn't get to keep the VP post, but it would still be a good marketing job."

Paula sat up and turned around, her eyes full of surprise. "You'd give up your job and come with me?"

"Well, maybe not right away. But after you get settled and you're sure you like it. And we're sure that...."

Paula couldn't believe what she was hearing. The sheer magnitude of Wynne's offer was astounding. She was willing to walk away from her job as a corporate VP just to be with her.

"Wynne, I don't know what to say."

"Just think about it. We have a couple of days." Wynne felt like a weight had been lifted from her chest. Paula was far more important than a job - any job. "I do love you, Paula."

"I love you too, she answered, fighting back tears. "Stay here tonight."

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Wynne awakened to the strangest, most wonderful sensation. She was lying on her back in Paula's bed with the petite woman draped across her body, the blonde hair tucked beneath her chin. Slayer rested on the pillow, purring softly in her ear. There were no alarms, no planes to catch, nothing to pull her away from the comfort of this embrace.

Paula wiggled in response to the awakening muscles underneath her, instinctively drawing closer before she became cognizant of where she was. She had lain awake last night after their lovemaking, after the slow deep breathing told her that Wynne had fallen asleep. Remembering what they'd talked about, she couldn't believe that she could have her cake and eat it too. She could hold the number two spot in one of Weller Regent's top hotels *and* come home to this every night. That was hard to beat.

"You awake?" Wynne gently caressed the soft shoulders.

"Yeah." Paula lifted her head and chuckled at the contented cat. "I see you have a visitor."

"He's such a doll," Wynne cooed. "So are you."

"You too." Paula cuddled again. "You know, I still can't get over you being willing to give up your job and move with me."

"Are you kidding? I'm not letting you go, Paula McKenzie. You can run, but I'm going to follow you wherever you go."

Paula squeezed her tightly. "You made the decision easy, Wynne. Thank you."

"When do you have to be there?"

"I'm not going."

The tall woman blinked and struggled to sit up. "You're what?"

"I'm not going. There are a lot more important things in this world than jumping through all the hoops to get to the top of a hotel hierarchy. I'll get there eventually, but if all I have is a job, what's it worth?"

"But a job isn't all you'd have, Paula. I told you I'd go."

"I know, and knowing that you were willing to do that showed me what I needed to know."

Wynne shook her head in confusion.

"Look, before we talked last night, I was afraid *not* to take it. I knew if I turned it down and things didn't work out between us, I'd resent you for it, and be angry with myself for making the wrong decision. But with you willing to give up your job to go with me, I realized that you were really serious about us, really committed to it. I didn't know it, but that's what I needed to see."

"So we're not going?"

"Nope, we're not going. And by the way, Stephanie Anderson is going to want to meet you so she can kiss your feet."

"And I think Cheryl Williams will want to kiss yours if she ever finds out how close I came to leaving."

Paula gently pushed her lover back against the pillows, settling herself in the crook of the long arm. "This is right for us, Wynne. Moving up at WR wasn't all that important to me until you left. Before that, I was perfectly happy to stay here, do a good job, and wait for an opening so I could move up another notch. It was only when I thought that work was all I was ever going to have that I decided I had have it all, and as fast as I could get it."

"So you're okay to bide your time and wait for something here?"

"As long as I get to have you in my life."

"Then I'd say we have a deal."

Slayer stood and stretched his long body, hoping in vain that someone might offer a scratch. Maybe he'd go poke around in the kitchen and see if there was any of that canned beef left over from last night. It was probably going to be a while before anyone would think to ask if he was ready for his breakfast.

That's all, folks! As always, I'd love to hear from you. [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

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