

~ Sarah's Choice ~

by Norsebard

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This story depicts a loving relationship and hints at sexual relationships between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

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Jackie: thanks for being the Voice of Reason.

The 'TruAmerica Corporation' and the 'Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort' are just figments of my imagination and do not exist in real life - although I've obviously used existing, similar hotels as templates.

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Teaser: An introverted, lonely secretary and an extroverted actress... how is that ever going to work? That's the question Sarah Madeleine Michaels asks herself when she meets her dream girl while on holiday at a fitness resort. To some, the answer is blatantly obvious, but for Sarah, finding out takes her on a very bumpy journey where she learns more about herself than she really wants to know...

PROLOGUE - SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 13th

DINGDONGDINGDONGDINGDONG

Sarah Madeleine Michaels took off her oven mitts and hung them on a nail on the wall. She turned around and looked at the large clock above the kitchen door - her guest was right on time, for once.

On her way to the door, she cast a quick glance around her apartment - the table was set, the mood music was on, the candles were lit, the door to the bathroom was closed, the dust bunnies had all been exterminated by the Hoover and last but not least - all embarrassing items had been removed and chucked into the closet in the bedroom.

She checked her reflection in the mirror as she walked past it. She straightened the collar on her cobalt blue shirt and ran a hand through her black hair that came to just above shoulder-length. She made sure her belt buckle was centered and then she checked that her zipper of her black jeans was closed.

'God... thirty-three years old already... soon my hair's gonna turn gray and I'll be an old maid...' she thought and felt her shoulders slump slightly.

The door bell sounded again and Sarah tore herself away from the negative thoughts. In two steps, she was at the door and opened it - only to find her senses assaulted by a horrendous rendition of Happy Birthday.

"Happy birthday to you... happy birthday to you... Happy birthday dear Saaaaarah, happy birthday to youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."

Despite the off-off-off-Broadway quality of the singing, Sarah had to give kudos to her best friend, the perpetually enthusiastic and bouncy Kimberly Lloyd-Warren, for trying and she leaned down and gave the shorter woman a crushing bear hug.

"Oh, thank you, Kimmie," Sarah said and put her hand on Kimberly's shoulder.

"And let's hope you'll get laid real soooo-ooooooooon..." Kimberly continued with a beaming grin, singing loud enough for the entire hallway to hear.

"Jeez! Are you trying to get me evicted? Come in before you make my neighbors call the police!" Sarah said and ushered her guest inside.

Kimberly carefully placed a large, purple paper bag on the floor and hung her jacket on the hallstand.

"What's that?" Sarah said, pointing at the bag.

"That's for me to know and for you to find out... later," Kimberly purred.

"OK. Make yourself at home."

"You betcha. Oh, check out that wonderful smell! What are we having?"

"BBQ Chicken with potatoes, carrots and onions in butter sauce."

"That sounds deee-licious, Sarah."

"Yeah and hopefully, it'll end up as a BBQ chicken this time, instead of a piece of BBQ'ed charcoal," Sarah deadpanned and went into the kitchen.

"Works for me. Just say the word if you need any help," Kimberly said and fidgeted like she was prone to. She went back to the purple paper bag and picked it up - then she put it down again... and then she picked it back up. Finally deciding on keeping the bag in her hand, she went over to the couch and sat down, facing the large windows.

"Will do. Everything's on schedule right now, so..." Sarah said, busy using a corkscrew on a bottle of white wine.

"Oh, wow. I'd forgotten how spectacular the sunsets are when you watch them from the 17th floor..." Kimberly said and looked at the impressive vista outside the windows.

"Yeah, it's great. I don't think I could ever live at ground level again," Sarah said and placed two wineglasses on the coffee table.

"Chilled white before dinner?" she said and held up the bottle.

"Yes, please!"

Sarah poured the wine into the two glasses and then went back to the fridge with the bottle.

"Sarah, get your butt on the couch. I've got a hot one for you," Kimberly said. She opened the paper bag and looked into it. She couldn't hide a big, anticipatory grin from spreading out over her features and with a wink, she beckoned Sarah over to her by patting the seat next to her.

"Oh...?"

"Yep. C'mon."

Sarah sat down and turned around so she faced Kimberly. She couldn't hold back a throaty chuckle when she looked at the two of them - how it was possible for two people who were so different to be so close friends she'd never know.

Kimberly Lloyd-Warren had a full head of bopping ash blonde curls, blue eyes, a delicate nose and two cute dimples that somehow matched her sunny disposition perfectly. Sarah had heard Kimberly being described as a 'bag of bobcats' and she thought it was a pretty good fit.

And herself?

Sarah Michaels was tall and well-developed, with high cheekbones, thick, black hair and eyes like chips of blue ice. She loved to have her hair down to her shoulders, but at the same time, she flat out refused to wear dresses or make-up, so she didn't really know where she fit in.

They had known each other since the first day of kindergarten, where they had struck up an unprompted friendship. They had been best friends ever since and by being there for each other, their Coming Out had been a lot less stressful than for so many other people.

"Yoohoo? Sarah? Where'd ya go?" Kimberly said and waved her hand in front of Sarah's face.

"Sorry, I... just thought about you and me... 's all."

"Yeah, well, a new chapter is about to be written in that particular book," Kimberly said and placed the purple bag on Sarah's coffee table with a beaming smile.

"From me to you, with love," she said and pushed the bag across the table.

Sarah smiled broadly and picked it up.

"Do you know how difficult it is to get you a present?"

"Well, I..." Sarah said as she eagerly looked down into the bag. All she could see was a card with a large smiley face on it. She furrowed her brows and looked at Kimberly.

"You already have all the Xena DVD's 'n everything and you know... what's a swell gal to do? So I decided to splash out and buy something for the two of us," Kimberly continued.

Sarah pulled the card out of the bag and opened it. Her eyes grew wider and wider as it sank in that her gift consisted of two tickets to a week-long stay at one of the best fitness resorts in the country.

"Oh, Jesus Christ!" she croaked as she studied the printouts.

"Happy Birthday, Sarah!" Kimberly said and leaned across the couch to give Sarah a big thump on her shoulder.

"Oh, God, this is... this is too much!"

"Hell, no. We're best friends, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"No buts. Happy Birthday, Sarah."

"Gawd," Sarah croaked and wrapped her long arms around Kimberly to give the shorter woman a slow, loving, crushing hug.

"Thank you so very much, Kimberly," Sarah said when they separated. She wiped off her misty eyes on her sleeve, but found that the delicate fabric didn't agree with the salty liquid.

"You're welcome," Kimberly said and handed Sarah a napkin.

"A fitness resort... is this your way of saying that I should get in shape?" Sarah said with a grin as she dabbed the napkin against her eyes.

"Heh, heh. Nah, your shape is excellent. I've checked it out on the Net. They've got all kinds of things there, like tennis, handball and basketball courts, a mountain bike range, even Powerboxing classes."

"Really? I can't wait. I love Powerboxing. Oh, is Ellen coming along?" Sarah said as she crumpled the napkin into a little ball.

"No. It's just you and me. Secretly, I think she's glad to finally get a week off. Seven days of peace and quiet is something she doesn't often experience... well, that's what she told me, anyway," Kimberly said with a wink.

"Yeah, there can't be much of that while you're around, huh?" Sarah joked and laughed when Kimberly stuck out her tongue in a very juvenile fashion.

A loud DING was heard from the kitchen and Sarah jumped up and ran out there so she could get the chicken out of the oven before it became charred.

"Dinner's ready!" she shouted and pulled out the large fowl.

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"Man, Sarah, that was wonderful," Kimberly said and put her napkin on her empty plate.

"Thanks, Kimmie. That wasn't one of my worst dinners. I'm just going to pop the dishes into the machine, so why don't you go over and sit in the couch?"

"You don't want my help?" Kimberly said with a mock pout on her face.

"Nah, I can do it myself. Go make yourself comfortable."

"Well, you don't have to tell me twice. I'm a couch potato at heart."

"No, you're not," Sarah said and laughed.

Ten minutes later, Sarah wiped her hands on a towel and used her elbow to click off the lights in the kitchen.

"The coffee's brewing, but it'll be a few minutes," Sarah said and sat down next to Kimberly - who had a cheeky grin on her face.

"Oh, no, what are you up to now?"

"It's time for girl talk," Kimberly said, beaming.

"Girl talk? Oh, Kimmie, you know I don't do girl talk..."

"I'll start. Sarah, what do you look for in a woman?"

"Didn't you say you'll start?"

"Yes, and I'm asking you," Kimberly said and pointed at Sarah.

"What do I look for...? Hmmm. Well, you know, it's quite simple, actually. I look for..."

"A leggy, bosomy, blonde bombshell," Kimberly deadpanned.

"Well, I guess I wouldn't turn down a leggy, bosomy, blonde bombshell," Sarah said with a crooked grin.

"No, seriously... I'm not choosy at all when it comes to the physical part. When it comes to women, my heart is looking for a genuine smile, a genuine laugh and a pair of sparkling eyes. Yeah," Sarah continued and then fell silent.

She started thinking about the last time she had been on a date. It had been the disaster to top all disasters. She had spent ninety minutes at a Christmas party downtown listening to a stuck-up, high-strung and generally insufferable woman talking about herself - and then the annoying woman had the gall to quit the date prematurely because Sarah wasn't 'sophisticated' enough, didn't drive the 'right' car and wasn't wearing the 'right' clothes.

"So. Anyway. That's enough girl talk for one evening. I hope your wife is fit and healthy...?" Sarah said, after clearing her throat.

"Oh, no, you're not getting off the hook that easily. You know, that's part of your problem."

"My problem? Thanks a lot, buddy. It's my birthday party!" Sarah said and nudged Kimberly's shoulder.

"Yeah, but best friends are supposed to be honest with each other, especially on birthdays. I know you don't have the world's most exciting job... I mean, being a secretary in a company that manufactures pencils isn't exactly glitzy, but look at you... you're a knockout."

"Jeez, Kimberly, now you're makin' me blush..."

"Why don't you ever go to one of the bars? I know there are a few high-class ones in the area and I'll bet you could find someone in an instant."

"Oh, you know... I've tried that once or twice, but..." Sarah said and ran her hand over the top of the couch to smooth out a non-existent crease.

"But you always sorta sit by yourself in the corner and the other girls sorta get the wrong impression of you, or you sorta don't interpret their signals correctly. In any case, you always end up walking home alone, right?"

Sarah leaned back in the couch and stared at her best friend.

"Well... I suppose, but... have you been spying on me?"

"I've known you for nearly thirty years, Sarah. I *know* you," Kimberly said and patted Sarah's knee.

"Then you know that me and the bar crowd just don't mix. I'm an old-fashioned romantic. I like dinner, dancing and a midnight stroll in the park, but... it's just so hard to meet available women. I know I'm an introvert, but that's just who I am, Kimberly."

"A old-fashioned, romantic, introvert butch with a large wristwatch and a wallet on a chain," Kimberly said and laughed out loud.

"Where is your wallet, anyway?" she continued and leaned towards Sarah to see the aforementioned item.

"It's in my biker jacket," Sarah deadpanned.

"Oh."

"But anyway, all the other secretaries at the office are straight... In fact, I think I'm the only lesbian in the entire company," Sarah said and shrugged.

"You could try to broaden your horizon. Have you ever considered using one of those online dating services?"

"Oh, please. Deadbeatzfreakzandgeekz-dot-com? That's for the desperate people."

"And you're not?" Kimberly said with a wink.

"No. Nuh-uh. Just because I'm two years away from being an official Old Maid doesn't mean I'm desperate. I think the coffee's ready," Sarah said and quickly got up from the couch.

"This conversation ain't over, young lady!" Kimberly shouted after Sarah's retreating form.

"Oh, joy!"

A few minutes later, Sarah poured the steaming hot coffee into two cups and reached for the sugar bowl.

"Not for me, thanks," Kimberly said and held her hand above the cup.

"Really?"

"Yep. I need to lose some weight. Listen, Sarah... to get back to the other thing, I wish you'd at least look for someone to... well, to have fun with. I've been with Ellen for four years now and they've been the best years of my life. I wish you could experience that. A relationship is a magical thing," Kimberly said and took a sip from the cup.

"When it works."

"And if it doesn't, you'll just have to work hard to get it back on track. It's just like a car. If ya don't check under the hood from time to time, the machinery won't work."

"Yeah. I suppose," Sarah said and toyed with the ear of her cup.

"Who knows, you might meet someone at the resort," Kimberly said, looking over the rim of her cup.

"Now there's an idea. I could marry some filthy rich, blue-haired 85-year old widow and live off her fortune when she croaks."

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind... but if it works for you, I'm cool with it. Stud," Sarah said and thumped Sarah's shoulder.

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DAY 1 - SATURDAY, MAY 8th

As soon as Sarah and Kimberly cleared the arrival hall at the airport, they made a beeline for the nearest car rental company and rented a white BMW 328i Coupe.

After all the paperwork had been completed, they turned off the parking lot and ventured out into the busy AM traffic.

Despite the attendant's best efforts, Kimberly had felt completely lost when none of the knobs and dials were where she was used to, so when Sarah had offered to drive all the way, she had gladly accepted.

"102.2 miles to go, according to the GPS," Kimberly said, checking the readout on the electronic equipment. She made herself comfortable in the front seat and folded down the sunscreen.

"102 miles to Chicago, we've got a full tank o' gas, half a pack o' cigs, it's dark and we're wearin' sunglasses," Sarah drawled.

"Uhhhh... I'm sorry...? You know we're not anywhere near Chicago, right?"

"It's from the Blues Brothers," Sarah said and adjusted her sunglasses.

"Oh... you know I don't do those ancient movies."

"Blasphemy."

"But I could quote endlessly from Danielle Steel or Nora Roberts... if ya want?"

"Uhhh, no, thank you. Let's hear some music instead," Sarah said and turned on the radio.

Soon, they were cruising down the Interstate, with the air-conditioning going at full blast and the radio at '11'.

100.7 miles later, they turned off the Interstate and drove up a smaller road, heading for a huge structure.

"I guess we don't need the GPS anymore, huh?" Kimberly said and pointed out of the window.

"No. Even Stevie Wonder could find that big thing."

"Holy flip! Will ya look at that huuuuuge building!" Kimberly said excitedly as they drove closer to the hotel.

Sarah turned off the road and pulled up to a bar blocking their entry to a parking lot. She rolled down the window and looked intently at a metal post connected with the bar that had three buttons and a slot for an access card.

"Now what?" Kimberly asked and lifted her sunglasses so she could see what was going on.

"I reckon I need to press this little ol' button right here..." Sarah said and put her index finger on a button marked 'visitors'. A deep, buzzing sound was heard and the bar rose.

"Yep, that was the one," Kimberly said and dropped her sunglasses back in place.

As soon as they entered the parking lot, the sheer size of the resort made both women shake their heads in amazement. The main building was a high-rise, stretching far up into the heavens and next to it was a two-storey, mall-like structure, with a very extravagant entrance made of glass, concrete and chrome.

"... 32... 33... 34... 35. Thirty-five floors!" Kimberly said and whistled.

"I feel like a country bumpkin visiting the big city for the first time," Sarah said and laughed at her own joke.

They drove slowly around the parking lot until they found a vacant spot that wasn't too far away from the entrance to the high-rise.

Sarah pulled the little lever to open the trunk and then got out of the car. The heat almost bowled her over and she rapidly unbuttoned the top two buttons of her shirt.

"Hot, huh?" Kimberly said and used a piece of cardboard to fan her face.

"Too hot for tennis, that's for sure."

Sarah reached into the trunk and picked out her own travel bag. She put it down on the ground and then took out Kimberly's two big suitcases.

"Kimmie, try to go into the lobby and see if you can find a baggage trolley or some such," Sarah said and wiped off her suddenly sweaty neck.

"Good thinking, hon. I'll be right back."

A few minutes later, Kimberly returned, pushing an unusually large baggage trolley.

"Hey, ya didn't need to steal the whole freight train. A single wagon would've sufficed," Sarah joked.

"Laugh it up. They're all this size. You're tallest, you're pushing," Kimberly said as she placed their luggage on the cart.

"You got it."

Kimberly and Sarah walked through the automated double-doors and into a very stylistic reception area. The floor was white marble, very smooth and shiny and the reception desk itself was made of white, frosted glass and chrome tubes with a few golden accents here and there. The wall behind the desk was covered by an abstract sculpture carved out of dark gray granite and sprinkled with little, reflective crystals.

"Hello and welcome to the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort," the desk clerk said and smiled at Kimberly and Sarah - a plastic smile, Sarah noted.

"The Prudence Hotel?" Kimberly said, chuckling.

"Yes, indeed. How may I help you?" the desk clerk said, still wearing her plastic smile that had already begun to grate on Sarah's nerves.

The desk clerk was a young woman in her early twenties, wearing dark gray shorts and a dark blue polo shirt with the hotel's logo emblazoned on her left breast. On her right breast, a small name tag stated her name was 'Cheryl'.

"This is Miss Michaels and I'm Mrs. Lloyd-Warren. I've made reservations for two apartments for the week," Kimberly said and put the printouts on the counter.

"Thank you," Cheryl said and took the documents. She read them and began clicking on her computer. After a few seconds, the printer spewed out two pieces of paper which Cheryl put back on the counter.

"Miss Michaels, you have apartment 811 and Mrs. Lloyd-Warren, you're in apartment 812. They're located on the eighth floor. You both need to sign here, please," she said and pointed at a dotted line on the first printout.

After Kimberly and Sarah had signed, Cheryl took back the papers and checked Kimberly's signature against the information from the credit card company. Satisfied that they were identical, Cheryl inserted two blank access cards into a machine and punched a few numbers into the computer. When a small LED light changed from red to green, she took the cards out of the machine and placed them on the counter.

"Here are your keycards. The door to your apartments can only be unlocked by inserting the red end of the keycard into the slot on the door. The yellow end of your keycard is used for gaining access to the adult swimming pool, the Genuine Finnish Sauna and the Turkish Bath & Massage."

"But does it work with the minibar, huh?" Kimberly joked - unfortunately, Cheryl didn't seem to be in the mood for joking because, apart from a raised eyebrow, she didn't change her facial expression the slightest.

"Never mind..." Kimberly said and put her keycard into one of her bags.

"To get to the eighth floor, you can either use our Scenic Elevator, over there," Cheryl said and pointed at a set of elevator doors next to the entrance.

"... or our Turbolift, over there," Cheryl pointed down the other end of the hall.

"... or you can use the stairs, over there," she continued and pointed at a flight of stairs going upwards.

"Oh, hell no, not the stairs!" Kimberly said and shook her head vehemently.

"The TruAmerica Corporation wishes you a pleasant stay at the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort," Cheryl said, still wearing her patented plastic smile.

"Thank you. C'mon, Kimmie. Let's check out the Scenic Elevator," Sarah said, anxious to get away from the smiling automaton at the desk.

"Yep. I'll just grab one of these," Kimberly said and took a brochure from a display stand.

They placed the baggage trolley in front of the Scenic Elevator and Sarah whistled slowly.

"Wow... no wonder they call it the Scenic Elevator," she said and craned her neck upwards, looking at the empty elevator shaft. The shaft was simply a tube of glass on the outside of the building, offering an unrestricted view of the surrounding area.

"Holy flip, can you imagine going up to the 35th floor in this thing? Oh, boy," Kimberly said, holding the brochure in her hand.

"Yeah, I can, actually..."

Suddenly, they were swamped by a group of elderly men and women, all wearing mismatched sports clothes and headbands. Some of them were using canes, one even had a walker, and they were all jostling for position to be first into the Scenic Elevator.

"There's no room for all of us when we have this damn freight train with us. Let's take the Turbolift instead, Kimmie. We can take the scenic route when we're going down to eat lunch," Sarah said and began to back away from the elevator doors.

"Hey, Sarah... you have one guess. What do you think 'adult swimming pool' means?" Kimberly said, closely studying the brochure she had taken from the reception desk.

"Hmmm... no idea," Sarah said and pressed the UP button on the Turbolift.

"Co-ed. Nudist. Swimming. Pool."

"No shit?"

"No shit," Kimberly said and showed Sarah a picture of a group of men and women who were standing around a pool.

"But they're all wearing clothes?"

"Not the people in the water. If ya squint, ya can see a bare butt... right there," Kimberly said and pointed at an unidentifiable skin-toned blob in the background of the picture.

"That could be anything, Kimmie."

The Turbolift arrived with a Ding and Sarah pushed the heavy baggage trolley into it. She pressed the '8' and waited for the doors to close.

"It's a butt. I know what a butt looks like," Kimberly said and wiggled her eyebrows.

As soon as the doors closed, the Turbolift lived up to its name and sent Sarah and Kimberly skyward at breakneck speed.

On the eighth floor, the doors opened and the two women walked out on wobbly legs.

"My bwain... my bwain... my bwain is stuck in my thwoat!" Kimberly croaked and grabbed her head to make sure it was still attached to her shoulders.

"Next time, we'll take the Scenic Elevator!" Sarah said and shook her head.

"So, which way... oh, it's over there," Kimberly said and pointed at a sign on the wall which read

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APARTMENTS

<- 801-810 * 811-820 ->

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Once they had found apartment 811, Kimberly took Sarah's keycard and tried to get it into the electronic equipment on the lock.

"Was it the red or the yellow end into the slot? I think it was the yellow," Kimberly said, trying to mash the plastic card into the reader.

"Nope, it was the red."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

Kimberly flipped over the keycard and inserted it into the slot. After a few seconds, a loud click was heard and the door was unlocked.

"It was the red end. I knew it all along."

Kimberly pushed the door open so Sarah could roll the trolley inside.

"Wow, it looks even better than on the website!" she said, standing in the doorway.

"I wouldn't know, you're blocking my view..."

Kimberly ran over to the balcony and pulled apart the net curtains, so she could peek out of the windows.

"Oh, what a vista, man!"

"I'll have to take your word for it. Will ya give me a hand with the luggage? The trolley won't fit through the door.

"Oh... oh, sure. I'll be right there," Kimberly said, unable to tear herself away from the view. Sarah chuckled and stepped over the trolley to see for herself what all the fuss was about.

The apartment was made up of three rooms: a large livingroom with a couch arrangement, a comfortable armchair and a sideboard with a large flatscreen TV on it; a bedroom with a Queen-sized bed and three closets; and a relatively large bathroom with a spa.

The bathroom had white tiles on the walls and the floor, but the two other rooms were both equipped with an expensive looking carpet that had an abstract symbol woven into the fabric in a dark gray/pale gray pattern.

Sarah walked up to stand next to Kimberly and wrapped her arm around the shorter woman's shoulders.

"Thanks for the birthday present, Kimmie. This is really something else. I can't begin to tell you how excited I am to be here," Sarah said and gave Kimberly a big squeeze.

"You're welcome. Oh, we're gonna have a superfantastic time here, I'm sure of it!"

"Me, too. Are ya going to help me with the luggage now?"

Ten minutes later, Sarah was busy putting clothes into the closet in the bedroom when Kimberly bounced into the apartment, waving a piece of paper she held in her hand.

"Didya see it? Didya see it? No, ya didn't see it!" she said and jumped up and down.

"Hold yer horses, pardner! See what?"

"The free ticket to the variety show!"

"They have a variety show?"

"Apparently. It's in a basket next to the teevee... come on," Kimberly said and tugged on Sarah's shirt, forcibly pulling the dark haired woman out of the bedroom.

"Right there," Kimberly said and pointed at a small reed basket standing on the sideboard.

"A gift basket? How cool," Sarah said and went through the various items on display - a plastic jar with a liter of Papaya juice, a sugarfree candy bar, five sticks of sugarfree chewing gum, a gift certificate for a free drink in one of the restaurants in the mall and in a small envelope, a free ticket for the variety show.

"Papaya juice?" Sarah said and wrinkled her nose. She studied the small print on the plastic jar, but quickly put it back down on the sideboard.

"If you don't want it, gimme! It tastes great. Ellen buys it occasionally," Kimberly said and reached for the jar.

"Be my guest. A sugarfree candy bar... oh, joy."

"Yeah, you can keep that. I don't do sugarfree," Kimberly said and tossed the candy bar back into the basket.

"The variety show is tonight at seven-thirty... you wanna go?"

"Of course we're going to go! This week, we're going to do all kinds of things we wouldn't usually do, Sarah-baby. And that includes going to a variety show," Kimberly said and hooked her arm inside Sarah's.

"And best of all, it's a free ticket, so if the show sucks, we can walk out without losing money," Sarah added.

"Exactly. So...?"

"Deal," Sarah said, grinning.

"Yippee! Don't forget the gift certificates for the free drink. First I need a shower, but then I want to visit the mall downstairs. Let's go celebrate our arrival in a cozy little tourist trap."

"Good idea. Let's meet out in the hall in fifteen minutes," Sarah said and shooed Kimberly out of the apartment so she could finish organizing her clothes.

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Sarah stepped out into the hall, patting her front pocket to check if she had remembered the keycard - she had. She shut the door and yanked the door handle a couple of times to make sure the door was really locked.

Down the hall, Kimberly opened her door and shouted,

"Almost there!"

"I'll wait," Sarah replied and leaned against the wall.

A few minutes later, Kimberly bounced out into the hall and slammed the door shut behind her.

"And here I am, all ready to party... oh-my-God, Sarah... you've shaved your legs!" Kimberly said loud enough for the entire hall to hear.

"Oh, Jeez, pipe down will ya. So I've shaved my legs. Big deal," Sarah said and self-consciously crossed the aforementioned limbs. She was wearing a peach colored oversized T-shirt, a pair of white Bermuda shorts that came to her knees and white Nikes.

"This gotta be the first time in your adult life that you've shaved your legs," Kimberly said, sticking out her tongue.

"Of course it isn't. Jeez!"

"Just makin' a comment. Anyway, you look great, Sarah. Peach, huh?"

"What's wrong with peach?"

"Nothing at all wrong with peach. It's just a color I've never seen you wear before. Hey, did you remember the gift certificate for the free drink?"

"Yep," Sarah said and held up the piece of paper.

"I didn't," Kimberly said and went back to her own apartment to get it.

As they were waiting for the Scenic Elevator, Kimberly turned around to show off her new outfit.

"How do you think I look?"

Kimberly was wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt with a low collar and the top three buttons undone, and she had a scarf made out of blue silk draped around her neck. Blue shorts and white trainers completed the ensemble.

"Great, but won't it be too hot with the scarf?"

"Perhaps, but who says I have to dress like a mouse just because I'm married, huh?"

"True. You're definitely gonna attract attention."

The Scenic Elevator arrived with a Ding and Sarah and Kimberly stepped into the glass tube.

A TruAmerica employee was manning the lift and he greeted them with a replica of the desk clerk's plastic smile. According to his tag, his name was 'Mike', but neither Kimberly nor Sarah felt a burning desire to strike up a conversation with him.

"The lobby, please," Sarah said and tried hard to concentrate on the beautiful view outside the lift instead of fixating on the employee's irritatingly fake smile.

"Oh, wow! This is so cool!" Kimberly said as soon as they had entered the Mall.

The entire mall was encased in a huge structure made of glass and chrome and it stretched out further than they could see. An eclectic mix of high-class and fast food restaurants lined both sides of a wide path that was paved with pale yellow flat cobblestones. A bar had been inserted between every third restaurant, creating a unique and very cozy atmosphere.

"Oh, man, I never wanna leave!" Kimberly said and jumped up and down, slightly ruining her suave image.

"What d'ya want to do first, Kimmie? Get the free drink, or sightseeing?"

"Sightse... no, the free... The free drink."

"Which bar?"

"The first one looks nice... Ye Olde Englishe Bar. Sounds fun. C'mon, let's follow the yellow brick road!" Kimberly said and made a beeline for the bar.

Sarah followed her a bit more sedately and sat down on a bar stool.

" 'Englishe' ? Isn't there an E too much?" she said and laughed.

"Hello Ladies. Are you new here?" the bartender drawled in a slightly phony English accent as he was polishing the counter top.

"That's right. We've got these free drink certificates," Kimberly said and put hers on the counter. Sarah did the same and the bartender collected them.

"Two free drinks coming right up," he said, took two miniature tumblers and poured beer into them.

"Here ya go, Ladies. They're on the house," he said and walked away.

Sarah held up her three-ounce tumbler and made a face.

"Well... never look a gift horse in the mouth, I s'pose," she said and swallowed the free beer in one gulp.

A little later on, they reached a small piazza that had clearly been designed to invoke a sense of ancient times. A circular basin had been placed in the exact center of the piazza and it was crowned by a granite sculpture, proudly standing on a small pedestal. At irregular intervals, water sprayed out of a hidden nozzle and trickled down the sides of the sculpture before pooling in the basin below.

Several little figures of men and women engaged in all sorts of athletic events had been carved into the granite and in Sarah's eyes, it all looked terribly fake.

"Oh, there's the theater," Kimberly said and pointed at a building drawn back from the left side of the piazza. A contents bill announcing the acts in the variety show was displayed next to a pair of closed double-doors and Kimberly strode over to it to check it out.

"And Club Feelgood is opposite it. How convenient," Sarah said and followed Kimberly at a slower pace.

"They have three shows today, three-thirty, five-thirty and seven-thirty," Kimberly said, pointing at the contents bill.

"Who's performing? Some crooner who couldn't cut it in Vegas?"

"Uhhh, let me see... Professor Gemini LaQuizzle, Magician Extraordinaire, the Amazing Galbraith Twins, a Ballroom Dancing Exhibition starring June and Richard Eberhardt and the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort choir and orchestra, conducted by Wilfred F. Zane," Kimberly said, reading off the contents bill.

"Wilfred! That sounds... hmmm. What do you reckon the average age is for those people? 82?"

"We're gonna find out when we come back for the seven-thirty show," Kimberly said and hooked her arm inside Sarah's.

"C'mon, let's go find a place to eat," she continued and pulled the taller woman away from the theater.

"Well, at least we have one hell of a selection to choose from..." Kimberly said, chuckling. She had unfolded the brochure and was busy going through the list of restaurants available to them.

Sarah leaned in and put her chin on Kimberly's shoulder.

"Italian... had that last night. Kosher... no. Middle Eastern... no. Seafood... no. Vegetarian... no. Scandinavian... no. Texas steak house... no," Sarah said.

"Boy, you're so damn picky!"

"Thai... no. Argentinean... no. Mexican... too much gas," Sarah said, prompting a very loud belly laugh from Kimberly.

"Turkish... no. Russian... no. Oh, look, The Sausage King, genuine German Brats served. How about it, Kimmie?"

"Brats?"

"Bratwurst, you know... fried sausages. With potato salad and everything... oh, I used to get that all the time when I visited my grandparents up in Wisconsin."

"Bratwurst!"

"Yeah. Let me see where it is..." Sarah said and yanked the brochure out of Kimberly's hands. After getting the info, she looked around to find a point of reference.

"Mmmmmm, OK, got it. The theater is #46 and the King is #7, so it's up near the entrance. Come on, you'll love it," Sarah said and pulled the reluctant Kimberly towards the restaurant.

"Bratwurst?!"

It didn't take long for Sarah and Kimberly to find the Sausage King and they were soon walking through the Oktoberfest-styled entrance. Even though the restaurant was well attended and the line at the beer taps was quite long, they didn't have any problems finding a table.

"This better be good, Sarah. Fried sausages," Kimberly said and snorted as she sat down opposite Sarah.

"Hey, what's so wrong with that?"

"You can choose from the world's finest cuisine and you pick... fried sausages."

"So? I love sausages. We can sample the fine cuisine the other days," Sarah said and picked up the menu. It didn't take her long to decide on what she wanted and she looked impatiently for the absent waiter.

Finally, a man in his late fifties came out of the kitchen and greeted them with a slightly less than enthusiastic nod.

"Guten tag. What can I get ya?" he said and placed a pair of salt and pepper shakers and two napkins on the table.

"Two #1's, please," Sarah said and gave the man the menus.

"All right. American or German-style potato salad?"

"Uhhh... German style for both."

"No, wait a minute... what's the difference?" Kimberly said.

"German-style potato salad is served cold. American style is served hot, Miss," the waiter said.

"Oh... in that case, I'd like it German-style, please."

"How many Brats do you want each?"

"Well... that depends. How big are they?" Kimberly said.

"Eight inches long, one inch across, Miss."

Kimberly did a double-take and cleared her throat.

"Just one for me, thank you," she croaked.

"I'd like two, please," Sarah said and smirked when she looked at Kimberly's wide-eyed expression.

"All right. And beverages?" the man said and wrote the order down on a small notepad.

"A medium-sized pitcher of draught, please. And two glasses," Sarah said and took out her wallet.

"You pay when you're done, Miss, please. One pitcher, two potato salads and three Brats coming right up," the man said and closed the notebook.

"Thanks. Sounds great," Sarah said and leaned back in the chair.

The man nodded and left the table.

"Boy-o-boy-o-boy... is there no end to the wild and crazy things you expose me to, Sarah?" Kimberly said with a broad grin on her face.

"Trust me. You're gonna love your Brat," Sarah said and arranged her napkin.

Kimberly leaned forward in her chair and looked around sneakily.

"That's what you said that about that horrible pink drink, remember?" she said in a stage whisper.

"I did?"

"Yes!"

"Pink Demon... I used to have that all the time when I was a teenager. I wonder if...?" Sarah said and opened a small menu for wines and spirits that the man had forgotten to take with him when he left.

"Don't you even think about it, young lady!" Kimberly whispered.

A little while later, the waiter put down two plates, each loaded to the rim with a huge helping of potato salad and the greasiest fried sausages Kimberly had ever seen.

"Oh, man! Look at that," Sarah said and grabbed the silverware.

"Mmmhh, yeah. I can feel my arteries clogging as we speak," Kimberly said and quickly stuck out her tongue.

The waiter returned with the pitcher of beer and put it in the center of the table.

"Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you. The Brats smell great," Sarah said and grinned.

Kimberly sighed in a overly dramatic fashion and picked up her fork to go to work on the mountain of potato salad.

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At a quarter past seven PM, the doors to the Prudence Memorial Theater were opened and Kimberly and Sarah filed in with the rest of the crowd, which had actually turned out to be much larger than Sarah had anticipated.

They were met by a TruAmerica employee, wearing the same fake smile as all the others.

"Hello and welcome to the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort Variety Show. Your tickets, please."

Sarah held out the two free tickets and the woman took them.

"We're together, so we wanna sit next to each other," Sarah said and reached around Kimberly's shoulder.

"Row 11, seats 39 and 40," the employee said and used a ball point pen to put a quick doodle on the tickets, before handing the two pieces of paper back to Sarah.

"Thank..." Sarah started to say, but the employee had already turned away from them.

"Hello and welcome to the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort Variety Show. Your tickets, please."

Sarah chuckled and put her hands on Kimberly's shoulders to push the shorter woman safely through the crowd.

"Row 11... here it is..." Sarah said and pointed at the row of chairs. The chairs were in a deep burgundy color and appeared to be soft and comfortable - they even had armrests.

"I got dibs on seat 40," Kimberly said and quickly put her hand on the armrest. It was the first one from the aisle and she shuffled in and sat down faster than Sarah could register.

"Man, I don't think there's enough room for my legs in seat 39," Sarah said and looked at the relatively small space between the rows of chairs.

"Oh... you're right. No problem, let's swap. That way, you can stretch your timberlogs out into the aisle."

"Thanks, Kimmie."

"Anytime. Hey, what do you think the show is like, anyway? I hope it's not too long. I have to go to the little girls' room," Kimberly said, prompting a groan from Sarah.

"The peanut gallery should remain quiet at all times," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"Told ya you shouldn't have had that third glass of beer at the dinner. Anyway, I doubt these variety shows can attract talented people, so, you know... it might be dull," Sarah said and sat down. As she had feared, her knees banged against the backrest of the chair in front, but by sitting crooked, she was able to stretch her legs past the chair and into the aisle.

Suddenly, the lights started to dim and the anticipation rose among the audience.

Once the lights had dimmed to the point of almost not being there at all, the heavy curtains were pulled apart, revealing an empty stage.

A single spotlight was turned on, shining a cone of light onto the center of the stage. From the left side, a solitary figure walked onto the stage to a rapturous applause from the audience.

The figure, dressed in white tie and tails and wearing white gloves, a crimson cape and a black top hat, was carrying a table with a marquee that said "Professor LaQuizzle, Magician Extraordinaire."

The figure put down the table in the cone of light and adjusted his top hat so it was on crooked. He smoothed out his dark mustache, clicked his heels together and bowed curtly to the audience, who responded by clapping again.

"Hey, there's something queer about that man," Sarah whispered to Kimberly, who nodded in return.

"It's a woman. I'm sure of it."

"She's doing a pretty good job of playing a man."

"Yep."

The magician reached into his sleeve and pulled out a magic wand. He took off his top hat, revealing a shaggy, unruly mop of white-blond hair. He placed the hat upside down on the table and tapped twice on the rim.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the professor said in a surprisingly rich voice. "For my first trick, I shall conjure up a dove. A white dove, no less. But this trick requires absolute silence and therefore, I must ask you to..."

Unscripted, someone in the audience sneezed and people started laughing. The magician was quick to take the cue and ran to the edge of the stage, gesticulating wildly, and silently, to the unfortunate person. More people started laughing and the magician presented a look of utter outrage, throwing his arms in the air. As he was doing that, the unmistakable sounds of a mocking trombone was played over the speakers and pretty soon, the magician had the audience in stitches.

"Wow, she's one hell of a mime. It's like watching a Charlie Chaplin movie," Sarah said.

Once the audience had calmed down, the magician returned to the table and said,

"Abracadabra!" - unfortunately, no white dove flew out of the top hat. The audience laughed again and the magician looked down into the hat - only to jump back in a shocked fashion. He clutched his head and staggered across the stage.

At the same time, a rabbit climbed out of the top hat and the audience went wild.

"How in the Sam Hill did that happen? She was just wearing that hat!" Kimberly said, rubbing her eyes.

"There's gotta be a hole in the table."

"Yeah, but there wasn't a hole in the hat!"

"Shhh, she's not done."

The magician slowly went up to the table and picked up the animal so the audience could see that it was a real, live rabbit. With a slow shake of the head, he walked towards stage-right and gave the rabbit to an unseen stagehand.

When the magician returned to the table, he reached into the top hat and found a small note which he proceeded to turn around in his hand several times.

"For my next trick... which I'm quite sure will be successful as I've practiced it ever since I could walk..."

A smattering of laughter ran through the audience and the magician pulled the outraged look again.

"Ahem! For my next trick, I shall require an assistant. Will the person in... row 11, seat 40 please come to the stage!"

People ooooh'ed and started clapping.

"Wait a minute, that's me!" Sarah croaked and grabbed hold of the armrests in a near-panic.

"Sa-rah! Sa-rah! Sa-rah! Sa-rah!" Kimberly chanted, wearing a huge grin on her face.

"No wait, Kimberly... this is your seat! You go up there!"

A bright spotlight was turned on right in Sarah's face and she had to shield her eyes.

"And get laughed at by 400 people? Hell, no! This is your fifteen minutes of fame, Sarah. Go for it!" Kimberly said and lifted Sarah's arm high up in the air.

When the audience saw the motion, they cheered and clapped even louder.

Sarah groaned pitifully, but eventually rose from her seat. On her way up to the stage, she was thanking her lucky stars that the clothes she was wearing were at least halfway decent - well, save for the stain on her T-shirt where she had dropped a forkful of potato salad...

As Sarah stepped onto the stage, the magician greeted her with a firm handshake.

"Don't worry. This is just a bit of fun," she said for Sarah's ears only.

"Good heavens! Are you wearing stilts?" the magician said out loud and bend over to look at Sarah's long legs.

"Amazing!" she said out loud and moved her hand in a sweeping motion to present Sarah's legs to the audience.

The audience laughed again and Sarah felt like her cheeks were close to spontaneous combustion. She had a nervous smile on her face and didn't know what to do with her hands, so she just let them fall limply down her sides.

"All right, my fair Lady. Oh, I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"S... Sarah."

"Hello, Sarah. I'm Professor Gemini LaQuizzle. I'm quite sure you've heard of me."

"Not really, no," Sarah said with a cheeky grin. The audience roared with laughter and the magician sent a mock Death Glare in Sarah's direction.

"Well, after tonight, I'll make sure you'll *never* forget me!" the magician said loudly and twirled his mustache again.

Up close, Sarah couldn't help but notice that the woman playing the magician was in fact quite good looking. She appeared to be in her late twenties, with very soft features, a cute button nose and jade-green eyes that sparkled in the bright lights. The only thing that spoiled the near-picture perfect image was the dark brown mustache.

The magician went over to the table and picked up a square object.

"Now! This is a brick. A common, garden-variety brick, made of the finest clay in the country. Now observe, as my lovely assistant here will shatter this brick against her forehead!"

The audience oooh'ed again and Sarah blinked a few times. The smile froze on her face and she felt like she should bolt from the stage.

Suddenly, a young boy, dressed like a ship's mate, ran onto the stage with a note for the magician.

Professor LaQuizzle took it and read it carefully. Wearing his patented look of outrage, he crumpled the note in his fist and started doing the gesticulating shtick again, this time directed at someone off-stage. The mocking trombone started again and the audience laughed a great deal.

Sarah could see that another actress was waiting in the wings and she wondered what was going to happen.

The magician turned towards Sarah and looked down at the brick he was still holding in his hand - and then looked back up at Sarah. His shoulders slumped and he slinked back to the table. All of a sudden, the magician held up the brick and threw it off-stage, out towards the waiting actress.

Out of sight of the audience, the second actress deftly caught it and Sarah could see that it was simply a prop made of some kind of heavy foam. A sound of breaking glass was heard and the magician jumped and threw his hands in the air.

Out in the wings, the waiting actress picked up a rolling pin and started running towards the stage. This was apparently a cue for the music, because at once, a wild chase-like theme started playing over the speakers.

The magician quickly ran to stage-left, taking the spotlight with him, leaving Sarah to stand in relative darkness.

The second actress bounded onto the stage, wearing a very matronly costume. She appeared heavy-set and she had her hair tied up in a bun. She was wearing a white apron over a long, dark brown dress and she was swinging the rolling pin high in the air.

The audience roared with laughter and Sarah had to surrender to it as well. When the actress playing the matron raced across the stage, she winked at Sarah as she passed her.

Both the magician and the matron disappeared off to the left, waited for a few seconds and then reappeared, running back towards stage-right.

Once there and out of sight of the audience, the matron quickly put down the rolling pin and gave the woman playing the magician a small, rolled up note, which she inserted into her glove.

The magician came back onto the stage and pretended to wipe the sweat off his brow. He came out to the center of the stage and the spotlight returned to him and Sarah.

"Well! For my final trick, I shall produce a very valuable item from my lovely assistant's left ear!" he said and stretched out his arms in a very magician-like fashion.

The audience laughed again and the magician moved over next to Sarah. He tried to reach up a few times and even jumped on the spot, pretending not to be able to reach up to Sarah's lofty heights.

A ripple of applause trickled through the audience and a few people cheered.

"Ahem! Would you be so kind as to bend down for a moment?" the magician said.

Sarah decided to play along, even though she was a bit embarrassed for being made fun of in front of such a large group of people. She leaned down and put her hands on her knees.

"Thank you," the magician said and reached up behind Sarah's left ear.

"Ah... HA!" the magician cried loudly and pulled out a rolled up piece of paper, seemingly coming straight out of Sarah's ear.

Sarah gawked at the paper and couldn't help scratching her ear.

"No, no, I'm sure I got it all," the magician said cheekily, making the audience laugh again.

"Oh, take a look at this, Ladies and Gentlemen! A \$100 gift certificate, valid in any of the restaurants, bars and fitness activities in the Mall! Congratulations, Sarah!" the magician said and held up the paper for people to see.

Just then, music started playing and the magician took Sarah's hand and raised it high in the air.

"Please give a big round of applause to my lovely assistant, Sarah!"

The audience responded by cheering loudly and Sarah blushed furiously and waved, very shyly, to the many people watching her.

Behind them, the heavy curtains started closing and two stage hands came out to remove the table with the props.

"Thanks, Sarah. That was fun, wasn't it?" the magician said for Sarah's ears only. She gave Sarah the gift certificate and pointed at the small set of stairs leading off the stage. Finally, she gave Sarah a blinding smile that nearly took the tall woman's breath away.

"And remember! Professor Gemini LaQuizzle, Magician Extraordinaire shall return!" the magician said and bowed to the audience. He turned around and fumbled directly into the curtains, nearly losing his balance.

The audience laughed again and started applauding to the sight of the magician trying to find the gap in the curtains. He finally gave up and slinked off to stage-right.

Sarah sat down next to Kimberly and breathed a sigh of relief.

"My hero!" Kimberly said with a giggle. She batted her eyelids and pretended to fawn.

"Oh, knock it off. Man, it's hot in here," Sarah said and pulled out her T-shirt to get some much needed cool air to her body.

"\$100, that's so great. What are you going to use it on?"

"Uhhh, dunno. I'll find something," Sarah said and wiped some sweat off her brow.

Down at the stage, the curtains were pulled apart again and the next act came out to a new round of rapturous applause.

The Amazing Galbraith Twins turned out to be sexagenarian jugglers, leaving plenty of time for Sarah to mull over the magician's green, sparkling eyes.

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DAY 2 - SUNDAY, MAY 9th

After getting dressed, Sarah walked back into the bathroom and clicked the light on. She looked at herself in the mirror and established pretty quickly that it was a very bad hair day indeed.

She sighed and tried to run a comb through her still damp hair, but no matter what she did, the hair still stuck out in weird directions. After trying for a minute, she threw down the comb and snorted loudly.

She went back into the living room and put on her wristwatch - it was just before nine, AM. Right on cue, her stomach growled and she picked up a copy of the hotel's brochure to see which of the restaurants served breakfast.

A few minutes later, someone knocked on Sarah's door and she went over to open it.

"Morning, Kimmie. Sleep well?"

"Nuh. Been having the burps all night. The damn vinegar in the damn potato salad doesn't agree with me at all."

"Well, you didn't have to eat it all, you know. You could have left some," Sarah said and chuckled.

"I didn't. How was your night?"

"I slept soundly," Sarah said with a grin.

"Uhhh... do you wanna borrow my gel?" Kimberly said and stifled a snicker when she saw Sarah's hair.

"It's the air-conditioning, OK? I don't have it this high back home. My hair hates it."

"Obviously."

"Do you wanna stand there and insult me all day, or do you wanna go and eat breakfast?" Sarah said and picked up her keycard and her wallet.

"Oh, definitely breakfast. I got the jones for some pancakes."

"Well, let's do it, then," Sarah said and shooed Kimberly out of the apartment.

The mall was just as busy as it had been on Saturday and by the time Sarah and Kimberly reached the restaurant they wanted to try, the line to the breakfast buffet snaked its way nearly out to the central path.

"Oh, joy," Sarah grumbled and her stomach echoed her sentiments by growling.

"Mmmh, this is gonna take us all morning," Kimberly said and started looking through the brochure to find an alternative.

"Hey, maybe the Sausage King serves a continental breakfast?" Sarah said and punched Kimberly's shoulder.

"Oh, hell, no. No more sausages. I want pancakes, dammit!"

"Yeah, well, I can understand that, but by the time we reach the counter, all the good stuff is going to be sold out."

Kimberly groaned and rubbed her forehead.

"Whose bright idea was this, anyway?" she said and sighed.

"Uhhh, yours? Tell you what, let's go down to the Sausage King. There's a risk it might suck, but we can always come back here, right? Besides, this line ain't going nowhere," Sarah said and pointed at a large group of men and women who were standing at the head of the queue, all engaged in an animated discussion about the sorry state of modern breakfast buffets.

A few minutes later, Sarah and Kimberly walked through the entrance to the Sausage King and were surprised to see that only a few people were standing in line at the buffet.

"Oh, that's not a good sign," Kimberly said, but picked up a tray anyway.

"Not so pessimistic this early in the morning, please. Let's see what they've got," Sarah said and put her hands on Kimberly's shoulders.

The buffet turned out to be well-stocked and Kimberly immediately started collecting various items.

"Cereal... milk for the cereal... whitebread... buns... jam... and orange juice... but no flippin' pancakes!" Kimberly said and scowled fiercely at a empty plate placed underneath a small piece of paper that read 'Genuine US Pancakes'.

Sarah took a large mug and went over to the coffee vending machine. She pressed a button labeled 'Coffee - Black' and waited patiently for the dark brown liquid to fill up the mug.

"Kimmie, you want some coffee?"

"I want some pancakes!"

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Sarah said and took another mug.

The waiter from the night before came out of the kitchen area, tying an apron around his waist. He nodded to Sarah and Kimberly when he recognized them and then began to clear some of the tables.

Kimberly searched the buffet table thoroughly in the vain hope that a pancake had somehow been misplaced, but the search wasn't successful. She sighed and put down the tray.

"They don't have any pancakes..." she said and scrunched up her face.

"Milk and sugar?" Sarah said and held up the sugar bowl.

"No, thank you."

"If we come here earlier tomorrow morning, maybe they'll still have some left," Sarah said and moved her tray over to the buffet table. She took a plastic bowl and poured two spoonfuls of cereal into it. Then she took a small carton of milk and two slices of whitebread.

"Yeah, I s'pose."

"Or, you could just ask the chef," the waiter said and grinned.

"Oh! Do you have any left?"

"We're making a new batch as I speak. It'll be a few minutes, but then we'll have a plateful," he said and went back to clearing the tables.

"Super! I can wait a few minutes," Kimberly said and planted her feet firmly on the ground next to the buffet table so she wouldn't miss it.

"While you stand guard, I'll carry *both* our trays down to a table, OK?" Sarah said and winked.

"OK. I'm not movin' an inch!"

A few minutes later, the waiter went into the kitchen area. He soon returned carrying a large plate with a stack of pancakes and put it down on the buffet table.

"Here ya go, Miss," he said and grinned again.

"Wheeee!" Kimberly squealed and quickly scooped up three pancakes on a small plate. She finished off by squirting golden syrup all over the pancakes, almost drowning the one on the bottom.

She carried the plate down to the table Sarah had chosen and sat down, wearing a huge grin.

"She scores!" she said and started digging into the top pancake.

"So, let me get this straight... you don't want sugar in your coffee, but you pour half a gallon of syrup on your pancakes?"

"Oh, that's hhhmhhppf not the hhhmffhghg same thing at all," Kimberly said though a mouthful of pancake, relishing every bite.

"No?" Sarah said and crunched loudly on her cereal.

"Nope. Syrup is a hhhmhhppf natural hhhmffhghg sweetener."

"Whatever you say, sugarbuns," Sarah said and chuckled.

Kimberly mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like 'smartass', but Sarah chose not to make a comment.

"Anyway. What do you want to do today, Kimmie?"

"I think we should check out the rest of the mall. Last night, we only made it as far as the theater. Unless I can't read a map..."

Sarah suddenly developed a nasty cough, where she sounded like she was hacking up a furball.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You said something about a map?"

Kimberly narrowed her eyes, but at the same time, she was unable to hold back a chuckle.

"Ha, ha. Drop dead, gorgeous. I'm trying to tell you that we still have all the sports and fitness facilities to check out," Kimberly said and dug into the second pancake.

"Sorry," Sarah said with a cheeky grin.

"I forgive ya. According to the brochure, there'll be plenty to see and do down there."

"Is that where the Powerboxing classes are?" Sarah said and put some strawberry jam on a slice of whitebread.

"Probably. Are you really serious about trying that? It looks so... so... badass."

"I think it looks sexy, actually," Sarah said and took a bite of the whitebread.

"Heh. I guess you could meet some tough gals there."

"Never mind the girls, I wanna meet Master Lo Yee Ping, the creator. He's a legend."

Kimberly leaned her head back and laughed out loud.

"You would, you weirdo!"

"He's so damn cool it hurts. I have several of his movies, you know."

"Oh yeah? Which ones? Fist-Fighter 14? Revenge Of The Buttkickers?"

"You can mock me all you want, but I've seen some of the DVDs you and Ellen have... and let me tell you, the Nora Roberts Collection Signature Edition won't buy you any street cred."

"No, but they'll buy me a ton of quality time on the couch with my girl. Can't beat that, can ya?" Kimberly said and took a long swig from her coffee.

"You're right, I can't. You win," Sarah said, chuckling.

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On their way back from eating breakfast, Sarah and Kimberly had barely made it into the lobby of the high-rise when Cheryl, the desk clerk, waved them over to her.

"Miss Michaels!" Cheryl said and waved her arm again.

"I better go and check," Sarah said and strode over to the reception desk.

"Miss Michaels, there's been a note delivered to you by one of our runners. Apparently you forgot something in the theater last night," Cheryl said, handing Sarah a folded up piece of paper.

"Forgot something in the theater? I didn't forget anything... I wonder what the hell that's all about," Sarah said as she read the note.

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Hello, Sarah.

I'm sorry I've had to contact you like this, but in the heat of the moment last night, we forgot a small detail.

I'm in room 1119 in the Prudence Hotel. Please come before noon, as I have a matinee at 1 PM and I need to be ready ahead of time.

J. Richards, "Professor LaQuizzle"

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Sarah scrunched up her face and scratched her hair. She checked her wristwatch, which read a quarter past 11.

"And that's it? Do you know anything about it?"

"No, I'm sorry, Miss, I haven't read the note. I only know what the runner told me. He didn't know your last name or your apartment number, but he described you and from there, it was easy enough to make the connection."

"Hmmm. All right. Thank you," Sarah said and walked back to the waiting Kimberly.

"Looks like the magician from last night wants a word with me," Sarah said, showing Kimberly the note.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Perhaps they're going to rescind the gift certificate."

"If they do, we're gonna sue the shirt off their backs!"

"One thing at a time, Tiger Lady. Let's take the Scenic Elevator."

A little while later, Sarah double-checked the apartment number on the slip of paper she'd been given - Room 1119. She looked up and saw the same number on the door.

Putting the piece of paper in her shorts pocket, Sarah knocked twice on the door.

"It's open!" a muffled voice said from the other side.

Sarah opened the door and peeked in. The living room had been transformed into a dressing room and it was filled past capacity with large suitcases and tons of clothes.

"Hel-lloo?"

Sarah stepped inside and looked around. The apartment was identical to her own, except that a make-up table with three mirrors and a powerful lamp had been placed against the wall where the sideboard with the TV set usually was and the curtains covering the balcony were off-white instead of tan.

"Oh, hi," someone suddenly said behind Sarah's back, making the tall woman jump a foot in the air.

"Jeez!" Sarah croaked and put a hand on her wildly beating heart. She had to do a double-take when she saw that Professor LaQuizzle was standing before her in full costume.

"Sorry 'bout that, Sarah," the woman said and adjusted her mustache.

"No problem..."

"Hello, I'm Joy Richards," the magician said and stretched out her hand.

"Sarah Madeleine Michaels," Sarah said with a smile as they shook hands.

"Oh, that's a pretty name... do you prefer to be called Maddie, then?" Joy said and made sure her cufflinks were on straight.

"No. Please call me Sarah. Nobody calls me Maddie. And I do mean nobody. Not even my mom."

"Oh... all right. Jaime will be here shortly, but first, I want to apologize for not getting this sorted last night," Joy said and donned her top hat. She made sure it was on crooked and tapped the rim with her index finger when it was just right.

"Who's Jaime? And getting what sorted?" Sarah said, her face one, large questionmark.

"Weren't you told? Oh, great, serves me right to use the runners like that."

"I was given a note saying I should come to your apartment... and I have. But I still don't know what on Earth is going on," Sarah said and showed Joy the small note.

"OK, let me explain... you were supposed to have your picture taken with me once the performance was over last night, but I don't know what the hell happened. Suddenly, the next number was starting and... well."

"Ohhh, so we're going to have the picture taken now?"

"Yep. Once Jaime's here, that is."

"I wish I had been told... I woulda dressed for the occasion," Sarah said and looked at her loud t-shirt and the bright red Bermuda shorts.

"Don't worry. You look great," Joy said and winked.

'Did she just flirt with me?' Sarah thought, but wisely kept it to herself.

Sarah looked around in the dressing room and noticed four small pictures taped onto one of the mirrors on the make-up table.

"Hey, is that you?" Sarah said and moved over to the table so she could study the pictures more closely.

"Yep. That's from last year when I did a one-woman show in my local GLBT community center. It was called 'Different, Yet Alike'. It was a pretty good show, if I do say so myself."

"Your local GLBT community center?"

"Yes. I hope you're not uncomfortable with that?"

"Nah. I'm just wondering why my Gaydar hasn't picked you up yet," Sarah said and returned to looking at the four pictures.

"Oh. It's the mustache," Joy said with a chuckle.

"It must be. Who were these characters?"

"They were very challenging to play because they were all loosely based on real people and I didn't want to make them too stereotypical. The first one, wearing a flannel shirt, a belt buckle the size of Texas and black jeans is Butch Swaggher. She's a butch with a big heart and she attracts a helluva lot of attention from the 'phobes for being so masculine."

"Butch Swaggher! Jeez Louise!" Sarah said and laughed out loud - as she was laughing, she briefly considered mentioning that she had all three clothing items in her own closet, but she decided against it.

"Wait until you hear the other names."

"They can't be worse than Butch Swagger..."

"The second woman, the one in the form-fitting blue jeans and the cut-off tanktop, is a young Scandinavian exchange student who was brought up in a much more liberal political climate to ours. She sort of acts as the voice of the future. Her name is Connie Lindquist. Try to say it fast a couple of times and you'll get the joke."

"Oh... heh, heh, heh."

"The third one is Krystal K. Leer. Big hair, big earrings, big car, big ego. She's a member of the Upper Class Lipstick Brigade and she doesn't consider herself a true lesbian. She's actually the most oppressed of all of them, because everything she owns has been provided by others, typically men in powerful positions. There's a risk she could lose it all if she's too vocal, so she generally keeps quiet about political issues."

"Mmmmm. I've met a few people like that," Sarah said thoughtfully, remembering her horror date at Christmas.

"And the fourth is sixty-year old Victoria Barricayde. She's an old-school activist and she only speaks in very, very frank terms. She represents the past, which is obviously the foundation for the present. Basically, she's telling us that while we've accomplished a lot, we still have a long way to go. She was actually the most difficult one to play, as she's the one furthest away from myself."

"Oh, wow, that's really interesting," Sarah said and looked from the four pictures over to the mustachioed, blonde woman standing next to her.

"I know, spot the difference, right?" Joy said and pretended to twirl her mustache.

Sarah smiled broadly and was about to speak out when someone knocked on the door.

"Joy, it's Jaime. Are you presentable?"

"Yep. Come on in."

The door swung open and a Hispanic man in his late twenties popped in, carrying an expensive looking digital camera, a tripod, a powerful lamp and something that resembled a rolled-up carpet.

"Hey, Professor," he said and grinned.

"Good afternoon, Jaime," Joy said in an affected voice and bowed.

"Joy, there's no flippin' room in here. We've got to do it in the hallway," Jaime said, as he looked around the apartment.

"Yeah, OK. No problem. Jaime, this is Sarah."

"Nice to meet ya," the photographer said, already working out the best angle to capture the two women.

"Hello. Look, Joy, this is way too much hassle just to get a picture of me. Why don't we just forget it, huh?" Sarah said and shrugged.

"No way. It's gonna be great, trust me. Jaime knows exactly what he's doing... right?" Joy said and nudged the photographer.

"Oh, you better believe it, Professor," Jaime said and grinned again.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but she was cut off by the energetic photographer.

"OK. We better get it done before your make-up melts, Joy. Come on," Jaime said and went back out into the hallway. Quickly and efficiently, he set up the tripod and the powerful lamp and then erected a temporary wall made of scaffolding. With a twirl, he attached the rolled-up carpet to it and stepped back to assess the look.

"Backdrop," Joy said off Sarah's raised eyebrows.

"Oh..."

"It'll have to do. Come, you stand here," Jaime said, took Sarah by the elbow and led her to the left side of the carpet.

"Professor, on the right, like that... OK."

Jaime stepped back and got behind the camera. He checked the light and the angle and took a picture to check if everything showed up the way it was supposed to.

"Mmmm, it's a bit too static. Joy, try taking Sarah's hand... oh, I mean... if it's all right with you, Sarah?"

"Sure," Sarah said and laughed. She raised her left hand and Joy took it.

At once, the actress stared at Sarah's fingers and she looked up at the tall woman with an unreadable expression on her face.

For the first time in years, Sarah felt acutely aware over the fact that she was missing the little finger on her left hand, and, at the same time, she felt a stab of disappointment when she realized that the actress was apparently freaking out over it.

"Joy, we're working here," Jaime said off Joy's look of surprise.

"Yeah... I know. Go on."

Jaime snapped a handful of pictures to make sure he got a good one and by the end of the session, he gave the two women a thumbsup.

Sarah immediately pulled her hand away from Joy and thrust it in her pocket.

"Yep. They'll work great. Sarah, we'll print them on 12" by 20" supergloss paper and have them delivered to your apartment. Free of charge, of course."

"Good."

"See ya later, Professor," Jaime said and collected all his equipment. He gave them a wave and then rushed down the hall.

"Yeah... See ya," Joy said, her cheeks tinged with a deep shade of pink.

"Joy, it's been..." -- "Sarah, I'm so sorr..." Sarah and Joy said simultaneously and then both stopped.

"You first," Sarah said, still with her hand thrust deep into her pocket.

"Look, Sarah, I'm really sorry about reacting like that. It was just... I don't know..."

"No sweat. I know some people are grossed out about it. No problem."

"Oh, no, it's not like that at all. I... Won't you come back into my apartment? I feel like such a jerk," Joy said, sounding very sincere.

Now it was Sarah's turn to look surprised - 'I feel like a jerk' definitely wasn't on the list of things she had imagined the actress would say.

"Come on. I'll make you a cup of coffee," Joy said and went back to the door to her apartment. She opened it and held out her arm in a welcoming gesture.

"Oh, you don't have to do that."

"I insist," Joy said and kept standing in the doorway.

"Well... OK."

"Don't you need to get ready for the matinee?" Sarah said, as Joy handed her a mug of coffee.

"Yeah, but I know my act by heart, so it won't matter if I'm a bit late to the rehearsals. Look, I'm really sorry about behaving that way before. It just caught me by surprise."

"It's OK," Sarah said and shrugged.

"How did it happen?" Joy said and shoved a large wad of clothes away from the side of the couch to make room for Sarah to sit down.

Sarah opened her mouth, but before she had time to reply, Joy clapped her hand over her mouth and groaned.

"Oh, God, I did it again! I'm sorry... I'm usually not this insensitive. I don't know what's come over me..."

"It's the mustache," Sarah said, echoing Joy's words from before. She stepped over to the couch and sat down to show that she wasn't upset.

"It must be."

"Come on, there's plenty of room here," Sarah said and patted the couch.

Joy flashed a relieved smile and sat down next to the taller woman.

"Well, it's been so long that I don't even notice it missing anymore. It doesn't hinder me at all, thank God," Sarah said and looked at her left hand.

"Was it an accident?"

"Yes. I guess I must've been six or seven. I had a candy apple red bicycle and I used to ride that thing like the whirlwind."

"Oh, wow, really? I did, too! Mine was neon green. I spent a lot of happy hours on that bike," Joy said and smiled broadly.

"I know exactly what you mean. Anyway, one day, I tried one daring maneuver too many and hit the curb. I went flying over the handlebars and when I landed, my little finger caught the brunt of it. It was forced sideways, snapping the bone like a twig and tearing all the blood vessels and the nerves."

"Oh God, how horrible," Joy said and unconsciously picked up Sarah's hand. She held it tight and gave it a little squeeze - suddenly, she noticed what she was doing and let go of the hand.

"I was rushed to the ER, of course, where they decided to amputate it. It was just too mangled," Sarah said and shrugged.

"And you've never had any lasting effects?"

"No. It didn't even stop me from using my bike."

"Oh... Sarah, do you still..."

Suddenly, Joy's cell phone rang and she excused herself and went over to the makeup table to pick it up.

"It's Joy ... yes, I do know what the time is. Will you calm down? I'll be there shortly ... within the next half hour, Dave ... Dave ... Dave! There's no need to shout, I'm not hard of hearing unlike most of the other acts ... Yes, Dave ... Yes. Goodbye, Dave."

Joy hung up and rolled her eyes repeatedly. She put the phone down on the makeup table and turned back to face Sarah.

"I'm sorry, that was my stage manager. He's gonna have kittens if I don't come down to the theater, so I'm afraid we'll have to cut it short. It was really fun talking to you, Sarah. Maybe we'll meet again some time."

Joy put out her hand and Sarah shook it with a smile.

"Maybe we will. I'm here for the week. You know, I think I might go to another of your shows. It was pretty funny, actually... most of it, anyway. The Galbraith Twins were boring as hell," Sarah said and got up from the couch.

"They're actually quite lively backstage. Go figure. It's really strange to be the only one there who's younger than fifty-five, though..."

"Heh, I can imagine. Well, see ya."

"Bye, Sarah," Joy said and closed the door behind the dark haired woman.

._*_*_*._

After an uneventful lunch, Sarah decided that it was time to get down to business and she and Kimberly returned to their apartments to change into their recently bought sportswear.

Sarah tied two perfect knots on her brand new Nikes and jumped up and down on the spot to test their strength. Satisfied with the result, she moved into the bedroom to eye herself in the mirror.

She definitely liked what she saw, and if put under a spotlight, she'd even call herself a bit sexy: pale gray sweatpants with two narrow black stripes down the sides, a dark gray sportsbra underneath a loose, black muscleshirt - that just happened to bring out her toned arms very nicely - and to round off the ensemble, two rainbow colored sweatbands around her wrists.

She clenched her fists and imagined herself engaged in a one-on-one with the Champ.

"Yeah. Powerboxing, here I come!" she said and threw a few punches in front of the mirror.

Kimberly was dressed slightly more subdued in a baby blue outfit and a white headband, but she and Sarah still made a striking couple as they walked through the mall, heading for the sports facilities at the other end of the long path.

"Oh, crap, no! Damn, damn, *damn!*" Sarah growled and covered her eyes with her hand. She moved it again and tried to read the note one more time in the hope that the contents had been magically altered in the intervening ten seconds.

'CLOSED FOR REFURBISHMENT.

POWERBOXING WILL REOPEN ON JUNE 1st'

"C. R. A. P!" she growled and threw her arms in the air.

"I'm really sorry, Sarah. I know how much you wanted to try that nonsense," Kimberly said and put her arm around Sarah's shoulder.

"Mmmmmhfff..."

"But you have several other things to try down here, look: We can play indoor tennis, squash, handball or basketball... or we can try the Turkish Bath & Massage?"

"No, no, no, no and no..."

"They have aerobics and danceroobics... hey, they even have martial arts. Wouldn't you like to try your hand at that?" Kimberly said and made a few mock chop-socky moves.

"No," Sarah said and shook her head repeatedly.

"Suit yourself. I'm gonna try the danceroobics. Are you sure you won't join me?"

"I can't dance," Sarah grumbled.

"Well, I can, and I love it. Come see me after you've lost the 'tude, OK?" Kimberly said and winked. She took her little bag with her spare clothes and walked into the danceroobics hall.

Sarah sighed and picked up her holdall. With a grunt, she sat down on a bench and crossed her arms over her chest.

After a few minutes, her mood had improved and she slung her holdall over her shoulder and walked into the halls on the far side of the central path, determined to find something useful to do.

The indoor tennis courts were all filled with people who, judging by the sheer number of botched plays, had never seen a tennis ball in action before. Sarah spent a few minutes in the spectator enclosure watching a grotesquely overweight man miss ball after ball after ball and she couldn't stop her toes from curling up in her Nikes. The man's incompetence soon got on her last nerve, so she left and moved on to the squash courts.

The skill levels on display there weren't any better and when the handball courts offered a similar story, Sarah sighed deeply and shuffled on.

She stopped in front of the basketball courts and took in the activities of the female players. During Sarah's teenage years, it had been a running gag in her family that she was a dead cert to be a pro basketball player one day - *'after all, you're tall and they're all gay,'* Sarah thought, clearly hearing her mother's voice - the unfortunate truth was that even if the ball was superglued to Sarah's hand, she'd still find a way to drop it.

Sarah chuckled quietly to herself and found a chair to sit on. Observing the players, she thought she could pick up a vibe from several of them, but she wasn't entirely sure. One or two of them cast a few glances at her and she wondered if they were thinking the same thing.

When the quarter came to a close, the players all gathered at the far end of the court, effectively ending the free show. Sarah shrugged and got up from the chair.

A few minutes later, Sarah shuffled out of the halls and went back into the central area of the mall. She debated with herself if she should take a look at the martial arts or go directly back to Kimberly - eventually, the martial arts won out.

The halls housing the activities on the other side of the central path were all identical - large windows towards the mall, wooden floors, bright strip lights in the ceiling and a large mirror at the back wall to make the room seem larger.

'And to give people an opportunity to fawn over themselves,' Sarah thought, chuckling.

The martial arts hall was relatively empty, with only a handful of people exercising. They were all wearing the traditional, characteristic white outfits and they were all looking overly serious.

Two men were fighting each other - or rather, they were trying to stare each other into submission. They moved a bit forth and then a bit back, and finally, one of the men kicked out at

the other. The other man sidestepped it easily and then they resumed the back-and-forth movements.

Sarah scrunched up her face and started chewing on the inside of her cheek. She loved a good martial arts flick, but she just couldn't get excited over the real thing. With a shrug, she moved on, intent on finding Kimberly.

It didn't even take Sarah one minute to develop an intense dislike to the instructor in the danceroobics hall. She was a young woman, early twenties at the most, with wild hair, fake lips, fake boobs that were completely disproportionate to the rest of her body, and a voice like a Moroccan mountain goat in heat. And if that wasn't enough, the microphone in the headset she was wearing had been set to maximum, making her awful voice blare through the hall like the Doomsday trumpets that had once brought down the great walls at Jericho.

The instructor had the guests going through what looked like an impossibly hard routine and most of the people weren't even able to keep up with her.

Sarah closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. She knew she'd get a throbbing headache in a matter of minutes if she didn't leave at once, so she quickly found Kimberly to let her know where she could find her.

Sarah walked in between the rows of people and found Kimberly who was sweating like a pig. Her sweatsuit had been transformed from baby blue to sweat-stained black and her hair was a soaked mess.

"Hey, Kimmie! I'm next door!" Sarah said, shouting to be heard over the thumping dance music and the instructor's horrendous voice.

"Huh?"

"Next door! I'm next door!"

"Huh?"

Sarah rolled her eyes and first pointed at herself and then at the wall separating the danceroobics and the aerobics halls.

Kimberly's face lit up as she caught what Sarah was trying to tell her and she nodded and gave Sarah a thumbsup.

Sarah returned the thumbsup and hurried out of the hall to escape the deafening wall of sound.

The aerobics hall was mercifully quiet, mostly because the majority of people there were senior citizens.

The instructor was a broad-shouldered man who looked exactly like a surfer dude - sandy hair, pale blue eyes and a deep tan. He was wearing a red sweat jacket, red shorts and red tennis shoes and Sarah couldn't help but wonder if he wore red underwear as well.

She shuffled down to the rear of the hall and found a nice, quiet spot next to an elderly lady and more importantly, far away from the instructor. She knew, after several painful experiences back in school, that her athletic looks made her appear far more skilled than she really was and she was in no mood to be made a fool of in front of the entire class.

She put her holdall down on the ground, opened it and took out a towel and a bottle of water.

"All right, are we ready?" the instructor said and most of the people said 'yes'.

"Good. You should all have a TruAmerica Corporation Stepping Stone in front of you. Please check. If you don't have one, please raise your hand and my assistant will provide one for you."

Sarah looked down - no stepping gizmo. She groaned and looked around at the other people. It appeared that she was the only one who didn't have one and she quickly raised her hand high in the air. The assistant brought her one, putting it down on the floor wearing the patented plastic smile.

"Are we all set?" the instructor said again, looking directly at Sarah. She nodded and creased her lips in something she hoped resembled a smile.

"Good! And here we go! Put your right foot up on the TruAmerica Corporation Stepping Stone... and down. And up. And down. All right, put your left foot up. And down. And..."

Sarah groaned inwardly over the idiotic exercise routine, but followed it anyway. The instructor seemed satisfied with the senior citizens, so he turned on some soft lounge music and moved on to the next item on the program.

Twenty-five minutes later, Sarah had hardly broken into a sweat, but most of the seniors had already bailed out and were standing along the wall, talking amongst each other.

The instructor checked his watch and turned off the music.

"That's all for now, ladies and gentlemen. I'll be hosting a high-impact class in five minutes. Anyone interested?" he joked, earning himself a smattering of laughs from the senior citizens.

Sarah seriously considered it, but came to the conclusion that Kimberly was probably worn down to her knees and that she might need help to get home. She sighed and took a swig from her bottle of water. She picked up her holdall and threw the bottle and the unused towel back in.

"Fancy meeting you here, Sarah," someone said right next to her and Sarah turned around to see who it was.

"Oh... Hi, Joy. Aren't you at the matinee?"

"That's been over for a while now. I have a couple of hours before the first of the regular shows, so..."

"Are you here for the high-impact class?" Sarah said with a grin.

"Yep. Hey, you look really sharp," Joy said and put down a small plastic bag with a towel. She unzipped her sweat jacket and took it off, revealing a tight, pale green spaghetti strap tank top.

Sarah tried very, very hard to keep her eyes trained on the actress' face so it wouldn't look like she was leering at the well-toned shoulders and arms, or at the gray sweat pants that redefined the word 'formfitting' - but unfortunately, Sarah was fighting a losing game as Joy started going through a warmup routine.

"Oh, thanks a lot. You do, too."

"Thanks. I don't understand... why were you in the senior citizen class?" Joy said, looking around at the elderly men and women who were still leaving the hall.

"Well, I guess I just happened to drop by at the wrong moment. Actually, I wanted to try the Powerboxing class, but that was closed."

"Yeah, has been for a while now. It'll reopen on June first, though."

"That won't help me much," Sarah said and laughed.

Suddenly, Joy bent over and grabbed her ankles. Holding her legs straight, she stretched several times, finishing off with putting her clenched fists on the floor. This movement accentuated the actress' rear end to the point of making Sarah lightheaded and she had to force herself to resume her breathing.

"Dear God almighty, you're limber..." Sarah croaked and stuck a finger inside the hem of her muscleshirt to get some cool air down her front.

"I need to be. It's actually quite hard work to play Professor LaQuizzle."

"I can imagine," Sarah said and fidgeted with her holdall. She wasn't really interested in taking part in the high-impact class, but she definitely wouldn't mind spending some time with the fascinating... and sexy... actress.

"You've got some great arms, Sarah. What do you do?"

"Oh, I'm just a secretary," Sarah said and shrugged.

"No, I meant what's your training regime?"

"Ohhhh. Well, I lift some light weights now and then. Nickel and dime stuff."

"Let me tell you, I think it looks pretty hot," Joy said, leaning in close to Sarah. The actress winked and flashed Sarah a beaming, genuine smile that nearly made Sarah's heart skip a beat.

"Uhhh... ummm... Thanks."

Sarah looked up and suddenly noticed Kimberly standing outside the aerobics hall, waving her arms like mad.

"Oh, I..." Sarah said, but she was cut off by the instructor announcing that the high-impact class would be commencing in two minutes' time.

"I'm sorry, Joy, I can't stay. That woman out there trying to outperform a windmill is a friend of mine and it definitely looks like she wants something from me," Sarah said and put the strap of her holdall over her shoulder.

"That's OK. Talk to you later," Joy said and gave Sarah another broad smile.

"This better be good, Kimmie," Sarah said, casting a glance back at Joy. She could easily see the actress' shaggy mop of white-blonde hair moving up and down and from side to side, following the instructor in whichever drill he had them going through. In a vision that only lasted a few heartbeats, Sarah saw Joy performing similar movements. In a bed. Naked.

'Well. Maybe some other lifetime,' Sarah thought and let out a long, slow sigh.

"I'm dead," Kimberly croaked and tried to run a hand through her impossibly sweat-soaked hair.

"Hmmm, you actually look quite alive to me. You certainly smell like you're alive..."

"I'm not. I'm dead."

"Tough class?"

"Murderous. God, my instructor was such a bitch. I swear she singled me out several times. I tried, I really did... but she was just so bitchy and mean."

"Mmmmyeah. I could've told you that just by the way she looked. And sounded."

"I need a warm shower. Hell, I need a steaming hot shower. Would you mind helping me get back to the apartment?"

Kimberly's face was so much like a soggy puppydog that Sarah couldn't help but laugh.

"Of course I don't. Come on, let's go," Sarah said and wrapped her arm around the shorter woman. Effortlessly, she hoisted up in Kimberly and helped her keep her balance.

"God, my legs are made of lead. Do you have any water left? I drank all mine."

"I still got some. Wait a minute," Sarah said and tried to hold Kimberly and rummage through her holdall at the same time. She finally found the nearly unused bottle of water and handed it to the shorter woman.

"Here ya go."

"Ohhhh, thanks. You're a lifesaver," Kimberly said and drained the bottle in one, seemingly endless gulp.

"Watch it, it's fizzy water. You're gonna..."

Kimberly burped loudly and immediately looked around with a horrified expression on her face.

"... burp. Yeah. Bless you," Sarah said and patted Kimberly on her back.

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DAY 3 - MONDAY, MAY 10th

"What in God's name is that horrible sound?" Sarah said out loud as a penetrating bell started ringing somewhere in the hallway. She put away the newspaper she was reading and went over to the window to look out. She pulled the curtains apart, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, the incessant ringing turned into a series of short burst and Sarah could hear a muffled voice from the PA system in the hallway. She quickly went over to the door and opened it.

'...ire Alarm. Fire Alarm. The elevators have been locked. Residents of floor six must use the stairs at the east end of the building. Residents of floors one through five and seven through 35

can use the stairs at either end of the building. All residents must evacuate to the lobby immediately.'

"Jesus!"

Sarah quickly ducked back into the apartment and scooped up her keycard and her wallet. She ran back out and pounded on the door to Kimberly's apartment.

"Kimmie! Wake up, we gotta go!"

"God, what's that awful sound?" Kimberly said as she opened the door. She was wearing baby blue bunny-slippers and an oversized T-shirt, and she was drying her hair with a huge towel.

"It's the fire alarm. We need to go. I don't wanna chance it being a false alarm."

"Yeah... OK," Kimberly said and threw the towel into the apartment.

"Don't forget your keycard," Sarah said and put her hand on the door so Kimberly wouldn't close it by accident.

"Good thinking. One sec."

Kimberly quickly came back to the door, waving her keycard so Sarah could see that she had it.

"Good. Let's go."

On their way down the stairs, they could smell smoke and it grew stronger and stronger as they came closer to the sixth floor.

They weren't able to look through the frosted glass door that connected the stairwell with the hallway, but they could clearly smell something burning.

"Do you think we should..." Sarah said and reached for the doorknob.

"No. No heroics, Sarah. Please," Kimberly said and put her hand on Sarah's arm.

"All right. Let's leave it to the pros."

A few minutes later, Sarah, Kimberly and around 150 other people were standing in the parking lot, watching the high-rise intently. Down the other end of the lot, four fire trucks arrived with their sirens blaring. The trucks drove through the gate and parked in front of the entrance.

Two groups of firefighters climbed out of the trucks and disappeared into the lobby of the hotel.

"At least it's not raining," Kimberly said, looking down at her bunny-slippers.

Several TruAmerica employees exited the lobby, carrying folding chairs and blankets and began distributing them among the elderly people.

Sarah got up on tiptoes and looked around for Joy, but she couldn't see the actress anywhere. A brief flash of something that felt just like panic raced through Sarah's body and she started biting her lip. She thrust her hands into her pockets and started clenching and unclenching her fists.

Suddenly she saw Jaime, the photographer, standing at the other end of the parking lot, furiously snapping pictures of the fire crews.

"Kimmie, please stay here. I'm just gonna go and talk to somebody," Sarah said,

"Huh? OK," Kimberly said, but Sarah was already moving away.

"Jaime!" Sarah said as she tried to move through a few of the other guests who weren't at all interested in moving. She finally managed to barge her way between them, earning herself a few upset words in the process.

"Jaime!"

"What? I'm really busy here," the photographer said, holding the camera high in the air so he could shoot above the crowd.

"Where's Joy? The actress?"

"I don't know."

"She's not here," Sarah said and felt the surge of panic return.

"I told you, I don't know where she is. Were you in your apartment when the alarm went off?"

"Yeah..."

"Do we have a fire or not?"

"Well, there's a lot of smoke on the sixth floor."

"Cool!"

"No it damn well isn't!" Sarah barked, making Jaime turn around and look at her.

"Whatever," he said and went back to taking pictures.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again, realizing that there wasn't any point in getting riled up over the photographer. She turned around and started walking back to Kimberly.

"Who was that?" Kimberly said, having watched the little intermezzo.

"A photographer. He knows Joy and I was thinking that he... never mind."

"The actress? She isn't here?"

"Not that I can see, no."

"I'm sure she's fine..."

"Of course she is. She's all the way up on eleventh. Why shouldn't she be fine?" Sarah said harshly and immediately regretted it.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Kimmie," she said and wrapped her arm around the shorter woman's shoulder.

"No problem, buddy. I understand. It's a quarter to twelve, right? Maybe she's down at the theater."

Sarah looked at her bare arm - her watch was still on the coffee table up in her apartment.

"Well... maybe she is."

"Man, I can't even remember the last time I heard a fire alarm," Kimberly said thoughtfully.

"We had one at the factory last year. One of the machines had lost all its cooling fluids and it overheated," Sarah said, still looking around in the vain hope that she had just overlooked Joy before.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. I remember you telling me that. It's kinda rare these, days though. Back in the..."

Kimberly kept speaking, but the words just turned into background noises for Sarah.

I can't believe I'm this worried for someone I've only known for less than two days. Hell, know her... I don't know her at all, I've only met her twice. She's a great-looking woman, no doubt about that, but that alone shouldn't make me feel this way. No... it's her smile. Her smile and her eyes. I haven't had anyone smile at me in such a way for years...' Sarah thought and sighed deeply.

"Hon, are you all right?" Kimberly said and gave Sarah a squeeze.

"I'm fine... I'm just shook up a bit."

"Once this mess is over, I'm buying you a drink in Ye Olde Englishe Pub."

"Oh, you don't have to..."

"Hey, I need one, too," Kimberly said and squeezed Sarah again.

A murmur rippled through the crowd and Sarah and Kimberly looked at the main entrance. Two firefighters walked out of the double doors, holding a metal garbage bin that still had some smoke pouring out of it. A sigh of relief spread through the spectators and Sarah ran her hand across her forehead.

"Looks like some scumbag didn't respect the no-smoking signs," Sarah growled and started looking around to see if she could spot someone wearing a guilty expression.

A TruAmerica employee came out into the parking lot, carrying a bullhorn. He cleared his throat and stepped up onto one of the low stone fences that surrounded the many flowerbeds in the lot.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the fire alarm has been canceled and you are free to return to your apartments. The TruAmerica Corporation sincerely apologizes for any discomfort this fire alarm has given you and as a small consolation, we will issue all afflicted apartments with a \$50 gift certificate. Thank you."

"Hey, that's another fifty bucks! If we stay here long enough, we'll have the whole trip covered!" Kimberly said, poking a finger into Sarah's side.

"Yeah."

"Looks like most people are going back to their apartments. How about going to the mall instead, huh? We can get that drink I promised you."

"In your bunny-slippers?"

"Why not?"

"Do you have any money on you?"

"Uhhh... no," Kimberly said and grinned apologetically.

Sarah tapped her pocket where her wallet was.

"I do. Let's go, 'cos I need a stiff one. You can pay me back later."

._*_*_*._

"Uggh... no, I'm not in the mood for that right now. Let's try the next one," Sarah said when she saw the massive number of people standing at Ye Olde Englishe Pub's bar.

"It's lunch time, Sarah. They're all gonna be full," Kimberly said, shuffling along in her baby blue bunny-slippers.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

They went back the central path and walked further into the mall, but every single bar or restaurant they passed was busy to the point of being overcrowded.

"Once we reach the Sausage King, I'm just gonna pop in and..."

"You want some Schnapps?"

"No, I need to pee!"

"Oh..."

"Actually... I'm not sure I can make it to the King!" Kimberly said and started walking funny. She sucked in her cheeks and began to get a very odd expression on her face.

"No, I... I... I... can't hold it, I gotta go," Kimberly said as they went past one of the Italian restaurants. She darted off to the left and was soon out of sight.

"I'll wait for ya!" Sarah said, but Kimberly was already too far away to hear it.

"Hi, Sarah," a familiar female voice suddenly said somewhere behind her and Sarah spun around in a flash.

"Wait for whom?" Joy said, greeting Sarah with one of her customary genuine smiles.

Sarah took a very deep breath and felt a large weight lift off her shoulders. Once again, she scolded herself for being so overly sensitive to someone she hardly knew, but a look into Joy's smiling, jade-green eyes drowned out everything else. Sarah had often been told that her face was an open book and she knew that at that exact moment, her face was showing emotions she wasn't sure the actress expected, or even wanted, to see.

'Calm down, Sarah. The last thing you want is to scare her away. And if you act like a nutjob, that's exactly what you'll do,' Sarah's inner voice said - Sarah agreed and tried to assume a more neutral expression.

"Oh, just a friend. Man, I'm glad to see you," she said.

"Yeah?"

"We just had a fire alarm out in the high-rise."

"Oh, no kidding? ...Of course you're not kidding. Sorry," Joy said and blushed slightly.

"Somebody had probably thrown a cigarette butt or something into a garbage bin and it really stank to high heaven. There was some smoke, too. We were shepherded out into the parking lot and I tried to look for you, but you weren't there and..."

'Sarah Madeleine Michaels, will you stop rambling! Remember what I told you about acting like a nutjob!' Sarah's inner voice said.

"And you were worried about me? God, that's so sweet, Sarah," Joy said and put her hand on Sarah's arm.

"Yeah, I guess I was... you know..."

"I heard the sirens while I was rehearsing, but I didn't know it was that bad. Where was it?"

"On the sixth floor."

"Oh. Listen, I have to go, but... Oh! Have you discovered the rooftop swimming pool yet?"

"Uhhh... that's not the adult swimming pool, is it?"

"Oh, no, that's down here in the mall somewhere. No, the rooftop swimming pool is just a regular pool. It's at the top of the high-rise and I always go there around one or two PM. It's a great way to relax before my shows," Joy said and flashed yet another of her broad smiles.

"I haven't been there."

"Perhaps we could meet there this afternoon? As I said, I'll be there at one PM or so...?"

"Well... sure. I'd like that," Sarah said, suddenly feeling slightly nervous and even a bit awkward. A swimming pool generally meant less clothing and she wasn't sure she'd be able to survive seeing Joy in a skimpy outfit.

"Good. See you there, then," Joy said and touched Sarah's arm. The touch sent a curious tingle racing through Sarah's body and she had to force herself to focus on something else.

"Yeah... Can't wait. See ya."

"Made it without wettin' my pants," Kimberly said when she returned.

"Oh, I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," Sarah said in an only slightly sarcastic tone - Kimberly replied by sticking out her tongue.

"I've just met Joy. She was at the theater," Sarah said as they resumed walking down the path.

"Great! Told ya she was fine."

"She's invited us up to the rooftop swimming pool at one PM. Wanna go?"

"Is... is that the adult swimming pool? Because I'm not sure..."

"No. This is the swimming pool for clothed people."

"Thank Gawd. Sure, I'd love to go. I can't wait to meet her," Kimberly said and hooked her arm inside Sarah's.

"All we need to do now is to find somewhere we can have that damn drink," Sarah said and shook her head.

._*_*_*._

Ten minutes past one PM, Sarah stepped out into the hallway and waved at Kimberly, who was already there waiting for her.

"Jeez, you'd think we were twins, or something," Sarah said when she saw what Kimberly was wearing. She chuckled and closed the door to her apartment. After locking it, she picked up a small plastic bag with a towel and her spare sunglasses.

"T-shirts and shorts... everyone's gonna be wearing T's and shorts, Sarah."

"Yeah, but not color-coded. Slightly less tan," Sarah said, pointing at her own T-shirt.

"... and slightly more tan," Sarah said and pointed at Kimberly as they started walking towards the Scenic Elevator.

"Big deal," Kimberly said and gave Sarah a gentle nudge on the shoulder.

Kimberly put on her RayBans and arranged her long, curly hair into a pony tail. She put on a white Panama hat and wrapped a scarf around her neck.

"Hey, Sarah, don't tell me you're not going to wear a hat?"

"I'm wearing sun block factor 54 and besides, you know I'm not a hat person," Sarah said and adjusted her own sunglasses.

"You're going to eat scrambled brains for dinner, buddy."

"Then I'll sit under the parasol. I'm not gonna swim, anyway. I'm only going so I can gawk at the pool bunnies."

Kimberly leaned her head back and let out a long, loud laugh.

"That's smooth, Sarah. Real smooth."

Fifteen minutes later, they were both sitting under a very large parasol, suffering from the effects of the oppressive heat - at one point, Sarah had poured most of a jug of icewater down her neck, but she was already cooking again.

"Look, if it's all right with you, I think I'm gonna go back to the apartment and lie down for a few years..." Sarah said and got up from the deck chair.

"Remember what I told you about scrambled brains, huh?" Kimberly said and waggled her index finger in Sarah's direction.

"Yes, mom..."

Suddenly, the glass doors to the pool area opened and Joy stepped out onto the deck. She was wearing an oversized T-shirt, designer sunglasses and a huge, wide-brimmed hat, and she had bathing slippers on her feet.

"Holy shit..." Kimberly suddenly said and moved her sunglasses away from her eyes.

Sarah's interest had been piqued and she turned around to look at whatever it was that had got her friend so riled up.

"Oh, Joy!" Sarah mumbled and whistled quietly to herself.

The actress had pulled off the oversized T-shirt, revealing her body to the guests at the pool. She was wearing a forest green two-piece bikini that hardly left anything to the imagination. She was lithe and athletic, with an impressive set of abs and well-toned thighs, shoulders and arms. When she put her wide-brimmed hat back on, her biceps flexed, causing Sarah to lick her lips.

"Mmmmm-wow," Sarah said under her breath.

"Down, boy, down!" Kimberly said and pretended to tug on Sarah's leash.

Joy first looked at a group of young men who were standing next to the pool, desperately trying to appear cool and studly and then at Sarah and Kimberly. A small smile flickered across the blonde woman's face and she stuffed the oversized T-shirt into a small plastic bag she was carrying - then she started walking towards Sarah.

"Oh man, that's exactly what I was afraid of..." Sarah said and rubbed her forehead.

"Are you sure she's a lez, Sarah? No grrrl I know would wear a two-piece..." Kimberly whispered through clenched teeth - Sarah shot her an Evil Eye, prompting a throaty laugh from Kimberly.

On her way towards Sarah and Kimberly, Joy reached into her plastic bag and picked out a small bottle of suntan lotion.

"Hi," she said, as she reached the parasol the two women were sitting under.

"Hi," Sarah and Kimberly said simultaneously.

"Ummm... do you think I could bribe one of you gals into giving me a rubdown?" Joy said and held up the bottle. She took off her sunglasses and zeroed in on Sarah's ice blue eyes that appeared not to be blinking.

Sarah just stared and stared and stared and stared - and inside her, a little alarm bell started ringing very loudly in her ear.

"Sarah, are you all right? You look a little dazed," Joy said.

"Dazed? No... everything's fine. I'm fine, you're fine... I mean, uhhh, uhhh, I'm cool. I'm hot but I'm cool. Anyway, this is my best friend, Kimberly," Sarah croaked and immediately cleared her throat.

"Jeez, wouldya listen to her rambling on. Don't pay her any attention, she's got sunstroke. I'm Kimberly Lloyd-Warren, hi," Kimberly said and laughed. She put out her hand and Joy shook it.

"Yeah, it is kinda hot up here. Pleased to meet you, Kimberly, I'm Joy Richards. So... best friend or girlfriend?"

"Ha! Just friend. I'm happily married," Kimberly said and showed Joy her wedding ring.

"Oh. That's interesting," Joy said and turned her head to look at Sarah. She held up the bottle of suntan lotion and let it dangle between her thumb and index finger.

"The lotion?" she said, wearing a cheeky grin.

"Oh! Oh, sure. Uhhh, do you want to... lie down?"

"It'll work best, I think," Joy said and turned around so she could pull over a deck chair. When she did so, the muscles on her back rippled and Sarah had to take a deep breath.

Joy turned around again and got down on her stomach. Once she was lying safely on the deck chair, she reached behind her to unclip her top. She moved her arms up to make sure that no one got a free show and then turned her head to look at Sarah.

Sarah's eyebrows twitched and she could hardly hold the bottle of lotion steady. She looked at Kimberly, who had a broad, goofy grin on her face.

"Go for it, killer," Kimberly mouthed and winked.

Sarah squeezed a blob of lotion onto Joy's back and began to rub it in. It had been a while since she had been this close to another woman and she could feel a tell-tale tingle begin somewhere deep in her core - it didn't help that Joy's back was so toned that Sarah could feel the muscles ripple and flex under her fingers.

All too soon, Sarah finished applying the lotion and she closed the lid on the bottle. She sighed inwardly and let her eyes roam down the back of the actress' firm body, from the top of her shaggy mop of blonde hair to the pink soles of her feet.

"Your back's all done, Joy," Sarah said and took a step back.

"Great. Thanks. I better do my legs myself. Would you mind closing my top?"

"Huh? Closing your legs? Oh... the top... I... uhhhh... hang on," Sarah said and reached for the two straps. Suddenly, she couldn't get her fingers to work and she fumbled incessantly with the straps.

Kimberly put her arms behind her head and leaned back in her deck chair, grinning like a Cheshire cat over the unusual sight of her best friend being so rattled. She chuckled wickedly when she thought of the endless ribbing she'd give Sarah for years to come.

"Got it... finally," Sarah said and clicked the two ends together.

Joy sat up and swung her legs around. She adjusted her top and greeted Sarah with a genuine smile that once again sent a tingle racing through the tall woman's body.

"Man, it's hot up here, huh?" Sarah said and began to fan her face with her hand.

"Yeah. You really should be wearing a hat, Sarah... especially with that dark hair of yours. You really don't wanna get sunstroke, believe me," Joy said and poured a blob of suntan lotion out in her hand. When she started distributing it on her right leg, Sarah forced herself to look away so it wouldn't appear like she was staring - unfortunately, she happened to look at Kimberly, who was still grinning wickedly.

"I know. I'm just not a hat person," Sarah said and sat down with a bump on her own deck chair.

After applying the lotion to her legs, Joy moved on to her stomach - and after finishing there, she pulled down her top slightly to put lotion on the swell of her breasts. The motion made Sarah shoot up from her deck chair.

"Listen, I'm really sorry for being such a party pooper, but I have to go and lie down for a while. I have black spots in my vision and... things," Sarah said frantically.

"That's what not wearing a hat will get ya," Kimberly said and winked.

"I know. Well... are you staying here, Kimmie?"

"Yep."

"OK. See ya in a while. It's been really nice talking to you, Joy, but I've gotta... uhhh... go."

"Hi, Sarah. Try putting a wet towel around your neck. That'll help," Joy said and sent yet another charming smile Sarah's way.

The nose crinkle that accompanied it nearly made Sarah's knees knock, so she spun around on her heel and hurried away from the rooftop swimming pool before she made an even bigger fool of herself.

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Several hours later, Kimberly walked up to the door to Sarah's apartment and knocked twice.

"Sarah? It's me!"

Sarah unlocked the door and stuck out her head. Her hair was pointing in several different directions all at once and Kimberly couldn't hold back a snicker.

"Still having a bad hair day, huh?"

"It's even worse today..." Sarah said and pushed the door open so Kimberly could come in.

Sarah adjusted the white towel she had wrapped around herself after her shower and sat down on the comfy chair. She put her bare feet up on a small foot stool and crossed her legs at the ankles.

"Have you had a cold shower, hon?" Kimberly said as she sat down on the couch.

"Yeah."

"Good, 'cos you really, really needed it. I thought you were gonna blow up when Joy started coating her boobs," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"I almost did. Ten more seconds and I would have," Sarah said with a deep sigh.

"But I definitely understand you. She's quite a babe."

"Mmmmm," Sarah said and started scratching the back of her hand.

"Mmmm...?" Kimberly echoed quizzically.

"Yeah, well, anyway... do you wanna go get something to eat? I'm starving."

"OK, but not the Sausage King. Anything but the King," Kimberly said and dug into her shorts pocket to find the list of restaurants.

"I loved those Brats..." Sarah grumbled.

"I'm sure you did. You chose the place yesterday, I'll choose today, OK?"

"Sure."

"Cap'n Lucrecia de Peligro's Seafood Restaurant & Bar," Kimberly said and pointed at a colorful picture in the brochure. She threw it over to Sarah, who picked it up and gave the ad a once-over.

"Looks pretty good."

"You betcha. You better get dressed, my stomach is sending out distress calls."

**_*_

"Oh look, there's Joy again. What a coincidence. D'ya think she's stalking us?" Kimberly said and bumped her elbow into Sarah's ribs on her way back from the seafood buffet. She sat down at their table and immediately started digging into her third helping of king prawns in Caribbean sauce.

"Ouch... where?" Sarah said and rubbed her side. She craned her neck, but couldn't see the blonde woman anywhere.

"Right at the door... hey, she has a boytoy with her."

"She has a *what* with her?"

"Wearing a rather flamboyant outfit, no less."

"That can't be her... oh, yes it is, actually..." Sarah said once she spotted the familiar head of shaggy hair. As Sarah was watching them, Joy sat down at a table and a man wearing black pants and a white, frilly shirt got seated next to her.

"Hrmpf," Sarah growled and crossed her arms over her chest in a sulky fashion.

"Oh... I'm sorry, hon," Kimberly said and put her hand on Sarah's arm.

"We don't know if he's with her or not! All we know is that she's dining with some hunk in a frilly shirt..." Sarah hissed. She took her fork and started stabbing at a mushroom on her plate. Finally managing to capture it, she flung it into her mouth and chewed far more on the soft vegetable than necessary.

"Sarah, I've read enough romantic novels to know that the hunk is her brother," Kimberly said after casting a long, analytical look at Joy and the man.

"Kimmie... I hate to break it to you, but we're not characters in a romantic novel," Sarah said, shaking her head with a throaty chuckle.

"I know that, silly. If we were, you and Joy would already have made it to second base... at least."

"OK, now you're freaking me out..."

"All you have to do to find out is to go over there and introduce yourself," Kimberly said and stole a large piece of red pepper from Sarah's plate. She chewed noisily on the succulent vegetable, prompting Sarah to put her fingers in her ears and send a glare in Kimberly's direction.

"Go over there...? Well, I'm a grown woman. I guess I could do that," Sarah said and put her napkin on the table.

"Of course you could. Go on, Sarah... make me proud," Kimberly said and gave Sarah a thumbsup for good luck.

Sarah slowly rose from her chair, but then froze. She sat down with a bump and sighed.

"I don't have anything to say to her."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Sarah! You don't have to quote Shakespeare. Comment on her tan lines, or how much you have the hots for her bod... anything will do!"

"I can't do that!" Sarah whined nasally, making a terrified grimace.

"Take it from an expert: you need to be romantic. Romance always works."

"If you're such an expert, why don't you go over there and ask her out?"

"One, I can't get my wedding ring off and two... you're the one she was ogling earlier up at the pool," Kimberly said and punched Sarah's arm.

"I was ogling her, not the other way 'round."

"Well, if you say so," Kimberly said and whistled.

Sarah sighed deeply and put her hands on the table. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the chair back and started walking towards Joy's table.

"Hello again, Joy," Sarah said, feeling like a fourteen-year old debutante.

"Oh, hi, Sarah," Joy said and smiled broadly at the dark haired woman.

'Gawd, can she get any cuter?' Sarah thought.

"Sarah, this is my stage manager, Dave Metcalfe. Dave, this is Sarah Michaels."

'Stage manager? Ha!'

"Hello, Mr. Metcalfe," Sarah said and put out her hand with a broad smile. The man took Sarah's hand in a powerful grip and shook it repeatedly.

"Oh, just Dave, please. Joy, I'm gonna go get something to eat while the line is so short," the stage manager said and left the table.

"Save some for me, huh?" Joy joked.

Sarah watched Dave walk away and then turned her attention back on the blonde actress.

"All right. Uhhh... Right. Well..." Sarah said and felt her throat choke up. Suddenly, she couldn't look Joy in the eye and she started shuffling left and right on the carpet.

Joy cocked her head and tried to hide a knowing smirk.

"Ummmm, Joy... would you... are you... would you be... do you have someth..." Sarah stuttered and stammered, feeling the most insecure she'd been in years.

"Gee, I don't know. I'm not sure we're speaking the same language...?" Joy said and put her elbows on the table.

"I mean, ummm, would you..." Sarah took a deep breath and clenched her fists repeatedly.

"Well, while you're composing your thoughts, I'd like to ask if you'd be interested in joining me on the mountain bike event tomorrow?" Joy said with a genuine smile.

Sarah furrowed her brows and opened her mouth. Then she closed it - and then she opened it again.

"Sure..." Sarah croaked, not quite understanding what had just happened.

"Yeah, 'cause I remember you telling me you used to ride a bike all the time when you were a little girl. Oh, by the way, do you have a helmet and elbow- and knee pads? It's a cross country event, actually," Joy said.

"Uh, no...? I don't have any of those things. I'm here for the indoor stuff."

"Oh... OK, the mountain bike event is at 10 AM. Let's meet at, say, nine and go shopping. There's a well-stocked sportswear store out in the mall and I know they've got a great selection of helmets. I bought mine there yesterday."

"Shopp... ing? For clothes?"

"Well, no, for the things I mentioned. It'll be fun. I'll pick you up at your apartment."

"Sure..."

"And your apartment number is...?"

"Uhhh... 811."

"Great. Looking forward to it already," Joy said and pushed her chair back.

"Where are you going?" Sarah said, completely confused by the turn of events.

"I'm going to get something to eat. Do you mind?" Joy said and laughed.

"Oh, no... Of course not. See you tomorrow morning, then?"

"Oh, absolutely. Perhaps we'll bump into each other before then," Joy said and smiled again before leaving the table and wiggling her way up to the buffet.

"Man, what happened over there, Sarah? You look shellshocked!" Kimberly said as Sarah shuffled back to their table.

Sarah shook her head slowly and sat down with a bump.

"Did you ask her out?"

"No."

"Oh, Sarah!"

"She asked me out," Sarah whispered, still wearing a confused look her face.

"Oh-ho, did she? I knew it, she can't get enough of you. Who's the hunk, then?"

"Her stage manager."

"Oh. Well, can't be right every time," Kimberly said and shrugged.

"And tomorrow she's taking me shopping."

"What?! Sarah Michaels shopping? You've known her for less than two days and she's already got you wrapped around her little finger!" Kimberly said and laughed out loud.

Sarah sighed deeply and shook her head.

"... Shopping for kneepads... and stuff," she whispered.

Kimberly pretended to clutch her heart and she fell face-first onto the table, missing the bowl of king prawns by mere inches.

"Stop the world, I want to get off!" she said in voice muffled by the tablecloth.

"Ha flippin' ha. Get up, people are staring at us."

Kimberly sat up straight, her face cracking open in an impossibly cheeky grin.

"Kimmie... did you and Joy just set me up?"

"What *do* you mean, dear Sarah," Kimberly said, feigning innocence. She grabbed one of the king prawns and dipped it into the Caribbean Sauce. Holding a hand under the prawn, she took it to her mouth and bit off its entire rear end in one go.

"Yes you did! I can't believe it!" Sarah said and slapped her hand on the tabletop.

"Temper, temper. Are you done with your plaice fillet? The buffet's all out of prawns," Kimberly said and reached for Sarah's plate.

"Help yourself, you cheeky, little..."

**_*_

"Do you want a night cap before we go back to the apartments?" Kimberly said and pointed at the restaurant's integrated bar.

"I don't know... it's kinda late," Sarah said and checked her watch - without either of them realizing it, the time had flown by and it was now a quarter to nine, PM.

"Late?"

"Some of us have to get up early in the morning, you know."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Do you want me to fetch you a plaid and your slippers, dear?" Kimberly said and quickly stepped out of Sarah's reach.

"I guess one little drink couldn't hurt..."

"Man, this is the definition of kitsch!" Sarah said the moment she saw the interior of the bar room.

All the booths were painted in dark brown with a few red and golden highlights here and there and Jolly Rogers and tattered battle flags adorned the walls. Each table had a lamp that was shaped like a candelabra and they were all equipped with special bulbs that simulated flickering light. On the bar counter itself, they had put several aviaries with stuffed birds - parrots and at least one budgie - and at regular intervals, a recording of a parrot crowing was played.

"Oh Gawd, this is just too much," Sarah said and shielded her eyes.

The bartender, a woman in her late thirties, came out from behind a curtain and started to move a few used glasses from the counter.

Sarah froze mid-step when she got a closer look at the woman's outfit: brown pants, a tan shirt with the sleeves cut off just below the elbows, a black vest, a triangular hat and to cap it all off, a fake parrot on her shoulder - in other words, the bartender was wearing a full-blown pirate costume.

"Ahoy, maties!" the bartender said with a grin.

"Ahoy, Captain. Do you have a cocktail menu?" Kimberly said and pushed the staring Sarah towards one of the booths.

"Yes, we do. Here you go," the bartender said and handed Kimberly a glossy card.

"Thanks. Come on, Sarah, let's go sit down."

"This is just too damn much..." Sarah said and rolled her eyes repeatedly. She had insisted on choosing a booth down the far end of the bar so she wouldn't have to look at the bartender.

"Yeah, but look at all the great drinks they have. How about that one?"

"Oyster juice? Ugggh!"

"That's just the name, silly. It's a Dry Martini. How about this one: Sweet Li'l Devil. Schweppes pink grape, vodka and a dash of sugar," Kimberly said and showed Sarah the colorful pictures in the menu.

"Pink grape and vodka? Hey, that's the Pink Demon! Oh, yeah..." Sarah said and grabbed the card right out of Kimberly's hand.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yeah! Miss!"

A few minutes later, the bartender came down to their booth, carrying a tray with two tall glasses, napkins and two long spoons.

"The Cuba Libre?" the bartender said as she put the tray down on the table.

"That's for me," Kimberly said and took the glass and one of the napkins.

"And this one's for me," Sarah said and took the other glass.

"Do you wish to pay at once?"

"No. We're not done," Sarah said, grinning.

"All right," the bartender said and left the booth.

"Hey, wouldya look at that," Sarah said and held the glass of Pink Demon up against one of the candelabra, making the sugar-coated rim stand out.

"I can't understand how you can drink that sickly sweet stuff," Kimberly said as she stirred her drink.

"And I can't understand why you only want a rum and Coke when there are so many great drinks to choose from."

"I love Cuba Libres."

"And I love Pink Demons. Cheers," Sarah said and took a sip from the drink.

"Cheers."

"Ohhhhhh yeah..." Sarah purred and leaned back in her seat.

Three pink demons later, Sarah knew she'd had at least one too many, but she didn't care - in fact, she didn't have a care in the world.

"That's funny... I can't remember them having such a kick..." she slurred and drained the last few drops out of the glass. She ran her tongue around the rim to lick off the last of the sugar and then put it down with a well-sated 'ahhhh'.

"It's because you're so much older now, hon."

"Hey, I may be a little tipsy, but I can still recognize an insult when I hear one."

"Weren't you supposed to get up early in the morning? You know, to meet Joy and go mountain biking?"

"Yeah?"

"Look at your watch."

Sarah held up her arm and tried to focus on the hands.

"Oh, God, it's five to one...!"

"No, it's five past eleven, but it's gonna take us half an hour to get back to the hotel."

"Hell, no."

"Trust me, Sarah, it will. You just sit here while I'll go and pay the nice lady with the stuffed parrot," Kimberly said and slid out of the booth.

"Okie-dokie," Sarah said, still trying to make sense of her wristwatch.

"Kimmie... you may have been right," Sarah said when she realized that she needed to lean on the wall of the bar just to keep her balance.

"Let's take it one step at a time. Come on, right foot first..."

Sarah moved her right leg forward and put down her foot.

"... That's my girl. Now the left one."

"I'm not that drunk, honest. I'm just a bit... tipsy."

"Yeah, and I'm Angelina Jolie."

Twenty-five minutes later, Kimberly fumbled with the keycard to Sarah's apartment. It wasn't the world's easiest task to stick the thin piece of plastic into the slot considering she had a six-foot tall, 154 lbs. heavy brunette hanging on her left shoulder, but she finally managed to get the door unlocked.

"Come on, old girl. Let's get you to bed," Kimberly said and dragged Sarah through the door and into the bedroom. She deposited the tipsy woman on the bed and went back to close the front door.

When she returned to the bedroom, Sarah sat up straight, clutching her head in her hands.

"You gonna spew?" Kimberly said hesitantly, but Sarah shook her head.

"No. I'm not really that drunk, just..."

"... Tipsy, I know," Kimberly said and reached down to take off Sarah's shoes. Sarah stopped her by putting a hand on Kimberly's arm.

"Kimmie... I need you to be honest with me. Do you think Joy is interested in me?"

"Oh, Jeez, Sarah... I don't know. Don't you think it's much too soon to even think about that?"

"You tell me."

"Well, she did ask a few questions about you up at the pool, but... I don't know. OK, your shoes are off, you can lie down now," Kimberly said and put Sarah's sneakers in the corner of the bedroom. Sarah responded immediately by falling backwards, ending up lying on top of the covers diagonally across the bed.

"You're gonna have to take off your T-shirt and your shorts yourself."

"Sure. I'll do that in a little while," Sarah slurred, already drifting off to dreamland.

"Yeah, in like six hours," Kimberly said and chuckled to herself.

"I envy you, Kimmie..."

"What? ...Why?"

"Because you have Ellen. Me... I'm... I'm just myself," Sarah whispered. Her breath evened out, and soon, she began to snore lightly.

"Oh, Sarah... my big, bad, lonely butch," Kimberly said and sat down on the edge of the bed. She moved a stray lock of hair away from Sarah's eyes and then leaned down to place a tiny kiss on her forehead.

"I really hope the two of you can work something out, but... after Saturday, there's going to be 1100 miles between you..." Kimberly whispered to herself.

With a sigh, she got off the bed and quietly left Sarah's apartment.

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DAY 4 - TUESDAY, MAY 11th

Knock, knock, knock

"Sarah? Are you in there? Hello? Are you all right?" Joy said, standing in the hallway, wearing trainers, khaki chinos and a black T-shirt. She checked her watch which read just after nine, AM.

Joy scrunched up her face and pulled her hand back to knock again. Before her knuckles could make an impact with the door, Kimberly stuck her head out of her own door.

"Hey, Joy. I heard the knockin' and thought it might be you."

"Is Sarah all right? We had arranged to meet here at nine, but..."

"We got home a little late last night. She discovered that the Peligro Bar had one of her favorite cocktails," Kimberly said and wiped off her hands on a towel.

"Oh... I know that story all too well," Joy said with a chuckle.

"I have her keycard. I'll be with ya in a flash," Kimberly said and closed the door.

"Sarah...? Wakey-wakey. You have a visitor," Kimberly said in a sing-song voice. She opened the door to the bedroom, but quickly established that Sarah wasn't in there.

"ZZZZZZZZZZ, mhhh... huh?" a muffled voice said from the living room. Kimberly peeked around the corner and couldn't hold back a big laugh when she saw Sarah sitting in the comfy chair in bare feet, PJ bottoms and a T-shirt that appeared to be on backwards.

"Mmmfmmfm... whut?" Sarah said and yawned widely. She rubbed her eyes and looked around - and spotted Joy's familiar mop of shaggy hair. Sarah rubbed her eyes again and shot up from the chair.

The remote control for the TV had been resting in her lap and when she got up, it took flight, bouncing off the armrest of the chair before landing on the carpet with a hollow clunk.

Joy covered her mouth with her hand, trying desperately not to laugh out loud over the unexpected sight. After a few seconds, she had reined in herself sufficiently to dare use her voice.

"Good morning, Sarah. We agreed on going shopping before the event, but... hmmm...!"

"I'm ready! Uhhh... buhhh... Kimmie, entertain our guest while I get dressed," Sarah said and strode towards the door to the bedroom.

Five minutes later, Sarah emerged fully dressed - and not a little embarrassed.

"Morning, Joy. Kimmie," Sarah said and ran a hand through her hair.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"Hi again," Joy said from the couch.

"That was a little awkward before, I... uhhh... I had actually got out of bed a quarter past eight and I was getting dressed, but then I just needed a two minute break and I guess I fell asleep again."

"It happens. No problem. Listen, are you sure you're ready for the mountain bike event? It's a ten-mile cross country trek," Joy said and leaned forward to put her arms on her knees.

"Uhhh... yeah. Yeah, sure I am. I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar," Sarah said and sat down at the other end of the couch to tie her shoelaces.

"And tonight you'll be saying, 'I Am Woman, Damn I'm Sore'," Kimberly deadpanned, earning herself a couple of throaty chuckles from both Sarah and Joy.

"Well, there's a remedy for that. After the event, perhaps we could go to the Turkish Bath & Massage?" Joy said.

Sarah froze mid-tie and looked first at Joy and then at Kimberly with an expression in her eyes that could be described as trepidation.

As a response, Kimberly raised an eyebrow, bared her teeth in a cheeky grin and nodded enthusiastically at Sarah.

"Uhhh... I guess," Sarah croaked and tried very hard to wipe anything that resembled an undressed Joy from her mind.

Fifteen minutes later, Sarah and Joy entered the sportswear store and went directly over to the shelves that had the bike gear.

"So, that's the knee- and elbow pads. Adjustable to fit all sizes," Sarah said and put the items into a small shopping basket.

"Do you want a plain helmet, or a multi-colored one?" Joy said and pointed at the display on the rear wall of the store.

"Gee, I don't know... what does your helmet look like?"

"It's plain white."

"Then I guess I'll choose one of those, too."

"We probably need some bicycle gloves as well. You know, the ones that have a Velcro strap on the inside and where the fingers are missing," Joy said. After a few seconds, she started blushing furiously when she realized what she had said.

"God, I'm sorry... I did it again," Joy said and shook her head apologetically.

Sarah chuckled and held up her left hand - the one with the missing little finger.

"Doesn't bother me at all, Joy, 'cos I know you're not doing it out of malice," Sarah said and waved the four fingers at the actress.

"Still... I've never been this insensitive before."

"Are you saying I bring out the worst in you?" Sarah quipped and meant it purely as a joke - but she was horrified to see a shocked expression on Joy's face.

'Shut your piehole before you destroy everything, you big, stupid idiot!' Sarah's inner voice roared in her ear.

"A joke... that was a joke," Sarah croaked, mentally bashing herself over the head numerous times.

"Well, I don't know about bringing out the worst in me, but I do know that I feel very relaxed when I'm near you, Sarah... and I guess that's why I stick my foot in my mouth so often," Joy said and flashed yet another of her bright, genuine smiles.

"Oh... thanks. Anyway, I better go find a helmet, or we'll never get to the main event," Sarah said and spun around on her heel.

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"Man, look at that... there must be fifty people waiting in that line," Sarah said as they pulled their rented mountain bikes up to the registration booth.

Everywhere she looked, she was greeted by a sea of people wearing colorful clothing and even more colorful helmets. The noise level was deafening and she sighed deeply.

"At least you can see their heads. I can only see Lycra-clad backs," Joy said and tried to jump up to get a better view.

"I think it's going to take a while. Everyone's getting some kind of sticker," Sarah said and adjusted her sunglasses. She couldn't help but feel a bit overdressed, especially when she looked at what the other people were wearing.

Most of the other contestants had on what looked like professional outfits, but there were a few people among them wearing regular clothes.

Sarah looked down at herself and furrowed her brow - she was wearing her pale gray sweatpants, as recommended by Joy, and a white long-sleeved shirt. Joy was still wearing the chinos from before, but she had also changed into a shirt. They were both wearing bicycle gloves, helmets and sunglasses and in addition to those things, Sarah was carrying a small pack on her back with some bottles of water and a first aid kit.

"Uhhh, Joy, are we dressed for the occasion? I think we look a little... I don't know... out of place?"

"This is a two-class event, Sarah. The professionals and the rest of us. We're going to compete in the amateur class."

"Ohhh... OK. That makes sense."

"Here you go, you're amateur team thirteen," a TruAmerica employee said and handed Sarah an information leaflet and two small stickers to put on their bikes.

"Oh, do we have to be thirteen? Why thirteen of all numbers?" Sarah complained, but the employee had already moved on to the next team.

"Great... thirteen. That's just what we needed. Now we're both gonna fall and break our legs..." Sarah grumbled as she pulled her bike past the booth.

"What are you moaning about?" Joy said, trying to keep up with Sarah's longer strides.

"We're team thirteen. Here's your sticker."

"Thanks. Are you superstitious?"

"No. I just don't like thirteen," Sarah said and took her helmet from the handlebar. She put it on and closed the chinstrap, making the plastic locks snap together with an audible click.

"Don't worry 'bout it. It'll all work out in the end," Joy said and put her hand on Sarah's back.

Despite the high ambient temperature, Sarah could feel the warmth from Joy's hand seep through the cotton shirt she was wearing and she marveled at how much she enjoyed being touched by the actress.

"Hey, guys!" a familiar voice shouted and Sarah turned around to find Kimberly in the crowd. The curly-haired woman was standing on the other side of a low fence, separating the contestants from the spectators.

"Hey. Have you come to pay us our last respects?" Sarah said as she walked over to the fence.

"Yep. Boy, you both look cool. Anyway, I've brought you some refreshments. Catch!" Kimberly said and threw Sarah a neatly wrapped bundle.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that. We have plenty of water and stuff already."

"I've bought you a couple of cucumber sandwiches."

"Cucumber sandwiches?"

"Yeah, they hold water, so they'll be great for the trek."

Sarah chuckled and put the bundle into her backpack.

"Thanks a lot, Kimberly. We really appreciate it," Joy said, flashing a beaming smile and a thumbsup.

A TruAmerica employee came out of the booth and turned on a bullhorn, producing a sound akin to nails running down a blackboard. Everybody jumped and several grumbled swearwords were heard.

"All amateur participants in the mountain bike event, please go to the starting area!"

"That's us. We better go," Sarah said and put on her backpack.

"Good luck, guys and... keep upright, OK?" Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"Will do. See ya at the finish line!"

All twenty amateur teams amassed all at once at the starting line, creating a chaotic mess of people and bikes - to battle the ever-increasing din, Sarah lifted her sunglasses and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oh, yeah, this is going to be so wonderful..." she grumbled and started thumbing through the leaflet they'd been given.

The objective of the amateur event is to find eight hidden checkpoints along a pre-defined ten-mile course and to get a stamp from an official at each of those checkpoints. The winner will be decided once all amateur teams has either returned to the starting area or forfeited their run.

"What do you think our chances are of finding even one checkpoint?" Sarah said, showing the leaflet to Joy.

"Well... that's hard to say. I think we should be able to find at least some of them. Right?"

"If you say so," Sarah said and laughed out loud.

The buzz among the contestants grew to impossible levels when a TruAmerica employee stepped up onto a small dais and raised a starting pistol high in the air. He looked across the sea of people to check if everyone was ready and once he was satisfied they were, he squeezed the trigger.

At once, all forty amateur bikers rushed out of the starting area and jumped onto their bikes. Predictably, several tangled with the biker next to them, causing havoc for the people behind. Some couldn't keep the balance and started falling down, creating a domino effect that suddenly left a huge pocket open for Sarah and Joy to drive through - once they had cleared the melee, they pedaled furiously to get away from the chaotic mess behind them.

After a few minutes, they were established as the fifth team and Sarah slowed down slightly to look over her shoulder.

"Man, they're still messed up back there. Unbelievable."

"Gold Medals, here we come!" Joy shouted and let out a whoop.

"It's a long race, let's save our strength."

"Already?"

Sarah laughed and nodded.

"Yes, already. I'm not really that used to bicycling, so I don't want to wear out my... uh... backside too soon."

"Oh. I get that. I wouldn't want anything to happen to it, either," Joy said and pulled slightly ahead of Sarah.

Sarah blinked a few times and almost forgot to work the pedals.

'And there she goes again, flirting with me...' Sarah's inner voice said.

"Man, that start was like the Oklahoma Land Rush..." Sarah said out loud and increased the pace to keep up with Joy.

"Yeah, I'm not sure they'd planned it that way."

"You have the leaflet. Where's the first checkpoint supposed to be?"

Joy reached behind her and took the leaflet out of her back pocket. She spread it out across the handlebars and tried to find their current position.

"I don't think it's too far. We're still in the flat area, but my best guess is that the first checkpoint will be somewhere over there, in the rough," Joy said and pointed at a cluster of trees in the distance.

"Well, let's giddy-up, then," Sarah said and turned towards the trees.

Forty-five minutes later, they had three stamps on a control sheet they'd been given at the first checkpoint.

"We've missed one, Sarah," Joy said, shielding her eyes with her free hand as she scouted out the road ahead.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, there's a checkpoint over there, but it's marked #5," Joy said and pointed at a small, manned post some distance away.

"Shit. Do you want to go back and search for #4, or...?" Sarah said and took off her sunglasses so she could spot the post Joy was referring to.

"Does it matter?" Joy said and slowed to a halt. She put her leg down on the ground and wiped some sweat off her neck.

"Nah. Not really," Sarah said and stopped next to the actress.

"Let's go over to that guy over there and get the stamp and then take a break. I'm getting a sore butt."

Joy got back in the saddle and pedaled heavily to get up to speed.

'Don't look... don't look... don't look!' Sarah's inner voice said, but to no avail - Sarah stared at Joy's perfectly rounded derriere as the athletic woman sped away from her.

"You coming?" Joy said over her shoulder.

"Uhhh... yeah."

A few minutes later, they crossed over a wooden bridge spanning a dry riverbed and pulled up next to the checkpoint.

A TruAmerica employee got up from the deck chair he'd been lounging in and went over to greet them.

"Hi. I need to see your control sheet, please."

"Hello. Here ya go," Joy said and handed the event official the piece of paper.

"Team thirteen, checkpoint #5... oh, you've missed one," the man said as he spotted the missing stamp.

"We know," Joy replied politely.

"Well, anyway, here's your stamp."

The event official used a rubber stamp to create a symbol in the checkbox for #5 and then handed the control sheet back to Joy.

"Thanks," Joy said with a smile.

"How many other teams have you seen?" Sarah said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, that's all hush-hush."

"Hmmm."

"Come on, Sarah, let's take a break. The far side of this little hill should provide us with some shadow," Joy said and tugged on Sarah's sleeve.

They rode around the small hill where the checkpoint was and found a suitable spot between some very large boulders.

As soon as they had stepped off their bikes, Sarah took off her sunglasses and her helmet and started ruffling her hair. Dust and sand rained out of her black locks, creating not only a small sandstorm, but a small hill at her feet.

"No wonder it was so damn scratchy..." she said and stuck her index fingers in her ears to get them cleaned out, too.

Joy crouched down and studied her bike. She scrunched up her face and tugged at the chain.

"Anything wrong?" Sarah said. She took off her backpack and unpacked the bottles of water and the lunch Kimberly had bought for them.

"The chain's a little slack, but I think it'll hold," Joy said and dusted off her hands. She took off her helmet and repeated the sandstorm trick Sarah had just been through.

"Man, we're gonna need some long, hot showers when we get back, huh?" Sarah said, grinning.

"Yeah. Hey, wouldn't it be fun if we found some hot springs out here somewhere? We could go skinny-dipping," Joy said and sat down on the boulder. She reached for the top sandwich and started biting into it.

Sarah's only reply was a faint nod, accompanied by a thousand-mile stare.

After they had finished Kimberly's cucumber sandwiches, they cut up the two apples they had brought along and put the slices on one of the napkins.

"Joy, what's it like being an actress in a variety show?" Sarah said and popped one of the slices into her mouth.

"Oh, you know... it's a living. No, it's all right, actually. I have another two weeks on my contract and then I'll be looking for something else," Joy said as she wiped off her mouth on a napkin.

"Isn't it boring to always do the same act?"

"Oh, no, not at all. The Professor has been in my family for decades. My granddad invented the act just after he returned from World War II and my dad continued with it when Gramps got too old. And now it's my turn."

"Oh, I didn't know that. That's really fascinating."

"I love the Professor. He allows me to show my zany side. Eight out of ten regular gigs are damn serious, so I love it when I get the opportunity to let my hair down... so to speak," Joy said and leaned back on the rock. She took off her sunglasses and wiped her eyes.

"How did he get that silly name?"

"Well, Gemini is my Zodiac sign and LaQuizzle... well, I guess Grandpa just thought the name had a great ring to it. When my dad played the character, he was just called Professor LaQuizzle. I added the Gemini myself."

Sarah nodded and took a big bite out of the next slice.

"Have you ever done any movies, or are you strictly a theater actress?"

"I've done a couple of movies, actually. I doubt you've heard of them, though."

"Ohhhh, don't be too sure. I have a bit of a B-movie fetish," Sarah said and chuckled.

"They were both horror movies. One was called Bloody Harvest and the other was... what was it... it was such an odd title..." Joy said and scrunched up her face. She used her index finger to tap on her nose, something that Sarah found terminally cute.

"Well, I'm safe for once. I don't know a horror movie called Bloody Harvest," Sarah said and finished off her apple.

"Oh, I remember now. The other movie was called Never Say Yes To A Stranger," Joy said and smiled.

"Never Say... oh, shoot. I have that on video..."

"No way!" Joy said and covered her eyes with her hand. She laughed out loud and shook her head from side to side.

"Fraid so. Barry Lane played the killer, right?"

"Right. Oh, God, I'm so embarrassed. So now you know how I looked when I was nineteen."

"Well, in my defense, I haven't watched it for years. My VCR broke down ages ago," Sarah said, chuckling.

"I was only in it for a few minutes, anyway. I played victim #2. It was just an ordinary slasher movie. They're a dime a dozen."

"And that's what they usually sell for as well," Sarah added.

"Heh. Yeah."

"Would you like to go back to making movies?" Sarah said as she took the cap off of her water bottle.

"Well... not if I had to play victim #2 again, that's for sure," Joy said with a shrug.

"How about victim #1, then?"

"Oh, ha ha!" Joy said and threw a mock punch in Sarah's direction.

Behind them, a large group of mountain bikes zoomed past, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Well, I guess we better get back to the race. How many checkpoints are left?"

"Too many," Joy said, studying the control sheet.

"Ah, who cares. It's been a pretty good day so far," Sarah said and got up from her boulder. She stretched her back and went down to the bike.

"Yeah. It's been great," Joy said and followed Sarah with her eyes.

"Damn... I know checkpoint eight is around here somewhere..." Sarah said as she scanned the surrounding area for any hidden clues.

"I can see the finish line from here, so you're right, we must be close to it," Joy said and wiped off her face and the side of her neck with her sleeve.

Sarah stopped and put her foot down on the ground. She shielded her eyes with her hands and slowly turned her head from left to right, scanning the horizon. She was feeling so worn out that she wasn't sure she could see far enough, but suddenly she picked up something that looked out of place - a flash of red in the middle of the green and brown desert.

"Hey... I think I got it... I definitely got it!" Sarah said and pointed at a cluster of trees a few hundred yards away from their position.

"Are you sure? I can't see anything...?"

"Oh yeah, it's there. There's a piece of plastic flapping in the breeze and it's in the TruAmerica red. Joy, if you don't feel like checking it out, hand me the control sheet and I'll do it."

"Hell, no. I trust ya," Joy said and started pedaling heavily to get up to speed.

"Congratulations, you've found the last checkpoint," the TruAmerica employee said as she put the last stamp on Sarah and Joy's control sheet.

"Great. Too bad we missed #4... we would've had 'em all," Sarah said and looked at the empty space where the stamp was supposed to be.

"Can you find your way to the finish line?" the woman said and sat down on a deck chair.

"Sure. Thanks," Joy said, wrapped her arm around Sarah's waist and pulled the taller woman away from the booth.

On their way back to their bikes, Joy suddenly reached up and planted a soft kiss on Sarah's dusty cheek.

"Great work, Sarah. Don't you think that was fun?"

Sarah was too stunned to really understand what had just happened, so she just nodded and grunted in a non-committal fashion - her inner voice was sending her all sorts of messages, but she was so tired that she didn't have the energy to listen to any of them.

She moved her hand up to touch the spot where Joy had kissed her only seconds before - and found her skin still tingling.

Twenty minutes later, Sarah and Joy crossed the finish line to the sounds of rapturous applauding by a large group of enthusiastic spectators.

While a TruAmerica employee took their control sheet to check it against the other teams, Sarah and Joy sat down on a couple of chairs as soon as they could.

Dusty, sweaty and weary, Sarah kept staring at her wristwatch, not quite understanding that it had only been two hours and ten minutes since the race had gone under way.

"This is what the forty days in the wilderness must've felt like," she croaked, her throat as dry as parchment.

"Yeah..." Joy said wearily. She slapped her hands against her arms to get rid of some of the grime, creating a cloud of dust that drifted through the air.

"Hey, guys! How did it go?" a familiar voice said and Sarah turned around to wave at Kimberly.

"Filthy," Sarah said and got up from the chair. She walked over to the low fence and put her hands on her hips.

"And sweaty," Joy said, moving up to stand next to Sarah.

"And... Gawd... phew... definitely smelly," Kimberly said and pretended to fan her hand in front of her nose.

"Oh, get outta here! We're not that bad," Sarah said and smelled her armpit.

"No comment. How many did you get?"

"We got seven out of the eight checkpoints. All in all, not too shabby."

"Did anything happen?"

"Happen?"

"Yeah, you know... saucy anecdotes you can relate to your best friend over a mug o' ale?"

"Nah. Well... not really," Sarah said and stole a glance at Joy - a gesture that didn't go unnoticed by Kimberly who hummed and raised an eyebrow.

A TruAmerica employee came up to them, flashing a broad smile that, quite unusually, was genuine. He stretched out his arms and patted both Sarah and Joy on their shoulders at the same time.

"Great news, you're in third place so far!" he said and waved their control sheet in the air before handing it back to Sarah.

Sarah did a double-take and turned her head to face Joy - who had done exactly the same.

"Well, I guess that's something at least..." Sarah said.

"And now confirmed in third place, we have team thirteen, Miss Sarah Michaels and Miss Joy Richards. Give them a hand, everybody!" the emcee said and stepped aside so Sarah and Joy could move up onto the podium.

They waved at the crowd who responded by clapping wildly - especially Kimberly, who was whistling, cheering and doing an impromptu victory dance.

"Congratulations. You have each won a \$75 gift certificate courtesy of the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort. The gift certificate is valid in any of the restaurants, bars and fitness activities in the Mall!" the emcee said in a voice that was just a bit too cheerful.

"All right!" Sarah said and gave Joy a high five.

"I'm going to use mine to get a VIP treatment at the Turkish Bath," Joy said and put a hand on the small of her back for effect.

"Oh yeah, that's right... we talked about doing that..." Sarah said and suddenly felt awkward all over again.

"Listen, Sarah, it's all right if you don't wanna come, but I've done it a couple of times and it's not what you think it is."

"Oh...? No, I'll be there. I just need a regular shower first."

A young girl stepped up onto the podium, carrying two bouquets of flowers. She handed one to Sarah and the other to Joy and then turned around to stand in front of them.

Suddenly Jaime appeared with his camera, snapping several pictures of Sarah and Joy. Sarah remembered the photographer's impudent attitude from the fire alarm the day before and showed her displeasure by arcing her eyebrow at him.

The emcee stepped back up onto the podium and shook Sarah's and Joy's hands.

"Congratulations," he said with the same plastic smile all TruAmerica employees wore.

"Are we done here?" Sarah croaked, earning herself a few laughs from the spectators.

"Yes, you may step down now."

"Thank you."

On tired, leaden legs, Sarah and Joy stepped off the podium and went over to the waiting Kimberly. Behind them, the emcee announced the second placed team, but neither Sarah nor Joy could muster up enough energy to stay and watch.

"Oh, man, you two look absolutely wrecked..." Kimberly said and put her arm around Sarah's shoulder.

"Wrecked is a good word, Kimberly," Joy said.

"I have dust where dust shouldn't be," Sarah said in a tired, whiny voice. She ran a hand through her hair, creating yet another duststorm.

"You need a drink, hon," Kimberly said and patted Sarah on her back.

"Make it a double and you've got company," Joy said and coughed.

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"Eighth floor, Sarah. This is where we live," Kimberly said and tugged on Sarah's sleeve.

"Huh? Oh... yeah. See ya later, Joy," Sarah said, stifling a fierce yawn as she stepped out of the elevator.

"I'll swing by in about an hours' time, OK?" Joy said, putting her hand on the elevator doors so they wouldn't close.

"Uhhh... can we make it an hour and a half? I really need a nap-uhhh... I mean, I really need a bath..."

"Sure. See ya then," Joy said and removed her hand from the doors. A few seconds later, the doors closed and the elevator continued upwards.

Sarah walked like a zombie towards her apartment and had a great deal of trouble inserting her keycard into the slot.

"C'mon you big lug, let me do it," Kimberly said and took the card. Effortlessly, she inserted the card, unlocking the door.

"Thanks, Kimmie," Sarah said and yawned again.

"You know, Sarah, I think there's something you've been keeping from me."

"Huh? What's that?"

"I coulda sworn your last birthday was your 33rd...?"

"Ugh. Don't remind me."

"How come you're looking and sounding like a 93 year-old, then?"

"I beg your pardon!" Sarah said and turned around to face Kimberly. Unfortunately, she turned around a little too quickly because not only was there a loud crunching sound coming from her back, the tip of her tennis shoe snagged on the corner of the door mat which nearly sent her flying head-first into the apartment.

"Ouch!" Sarah said and put a hand on her lower back. She stretched, resulting in a series of pops and cracks from her joints.

"Do you see my point?" Kimberly said, taking Sarah's arm to support the taller woman.

"Yeah, yeah. It was a rough event."

"I'm just teasin' ya 'cos I love ya, buddy," Kimberly said and gave Sarah a push with her shoulder.

"Ouch... I know."

"So... did anything happen between you and Joy?"

Sarah briefly looked at Kimberly, but chose not to answer her question. She closed the front door and went into the bathroom.

Sarah pulled her long-sleeved T-shirt free of her trousers and took it off. She held it up against the light, staring at the formerly white T - after being exposed to all the dust and grime, it had turned dark brown. She hung it on a hook and sat down on a plastic chair to take off her shoes.

"Sarah, on a more serious note... when was the last time you took your shirt off in front of another woman?" Kimberly said, studying Sarah's figure. Her long torso had exquisite proportions and she was neither sinewy nor bulky. She had a flat stomach and pleasantly toned arms and shoulders and, despite the fact that her breasts were currently held firmly in place by her sportsbra, it was clear to see that she was well-developed.

"Oh, well... it's been a while," Sarah said quietly and reached down to untie her shoelaces.

"Jeez, it's such a waste."

"Kimmie, I appreciate that you're trying to play matchmaker, but... you know," Sarah said with a chuckle.

"You didn't answer my question. Did anything happen between you and Joy?"

"Well..."

Kimberly moved over to Sarah and crouched down in front of her. She took Sarah's hands in her own and gave them a little squeeze.

"Something did happen and I'm not gonna leave until you tell me!" Kimberly said in an overly melodramatic voice that deservedly garnered an eye-roll from Sarah.

"Well, we had a great talk. About her career and... stuff. She's so easy to talk to. Everything just comes naturally. I really wanna listen to the things she's telling me... and that's a brand new experience for me. Some of the other women I've talked to... Gawd help us."

"I know exactly what you mean... Hey, that's pretty cool!" Kimberly said and slapped Sarah's thigh.

"And she kissed me on the cheek," Sarah said so quietly that Kimberly could hardly hear it.

"Huh?"

"She..." Sarah sat up straight and sighed deeply. She started toying with a loose thread on her sportsbra, apparently still coming to terms with what happened. "She kissed me on the cheek."

"Oh yeah, now you're talkin', buddy," Kimberly said and got up.

"I guess," Sarah said and kicked off her shoes. She got up from the chair and put her thumbs inside the elastic band of her sweatpants.

"But isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yeah, but... right now, I don't know what I want. It's just that... no. Never mind."

"Oh, come on, Sarah. Please tell me what's on your mind."

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She put her hands on her hips and slowly let out the air she'd been holding back.

"I'm afraid I'm gonna do something... or say something that'll foul it up. Again," Sarah said with a shrug.

Kimberly opened her mouth to reply, but found that she didn't really have anything to say.

"Look, Kimmie, I'm gonna shower now, so..."

"All right. I'll be over at my place. Come see me when you've showered. We're not done talking," Kimberly said and left the bathroom.

"I'll be there!" Sarah shouted.

When the front door clicked shut behind Kimberly, Sarah pulled down her sweatpants, stepped out of them and hung them on a hook next to the shirt.

She went over to the mirror and looked at herself. She moved her hand up to touch her cheek where Joy had kissed her and then ran her index finger slowly across her lips, imagining what kind of sensations it would produce if it was Joy's fingers doing that.

A sore back muscle made its presence felt, reminding Sarah why she was getting ready for a shower in the first place. She chuckled and reached behind her to undo her sportsbra.

**_*_

Twelve minutes of getting blasted with hot water had worked wonders on Sarah's stiff muscles and she felt like a brand new woman - albeit a tired one. She turned off the tap and let the last few drops run down her long body. She wrung the water out of her hair and stepped out of the shower.

As she reached for the towel, someone knocked on the door. Sarah started drying herself off and stepped into the living room, dressed only in her birthday suit.

"Kimmie, man! I told you I'd be over when I was done showering!"

"It's Joy, Sarah. There's something I want to talk to you about," Joy said, her voice muffled by the door.

Despite the closed door between them, Sarah went into a state of panic. She ran back into the bathroom, threw down the towel and picked up a TruAmerica terrycloth bathrobe.

"Uhhh... just a moment, Joy... I'm not... I'll be right there!"

"Sure," came the muffled answer.

Sarah quickly stuck her arm down the nearest available armhole - only to discover it was the wrong one. With a mumbled curse, she flipped the bathrobe around and put it on right. She wrapped the bathrobe tightly around herself, remembering to tie the waistband properly so it wouldn't slip open if she had to sit down. Finally, she bent over, grabbed the towel and resumed drying her hair.

In two steps, she was at the door. She flung it open, creating a shockwave of air that threatened to lift up her bathrobe.

"Hi again, Joy. Sorry it took so long."

"Hi, Sarah. Ummm... you're all wet... I guess I caught you in the shower."

"In more ways than one, yes."

"I was about to take one, too and then I started feeling really guilty. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that you must've felt that I was trying to force you to go to the Turkish Bath with me... but that's not what I wanted at all..."

"Oh... well, can we talk about it inside? There's a breeze out here and it's kinda chilly," Sarah said and tried to close the bathrobe even more.

"Of course."

A few moments later, Joy sat down on the couch, still wearing the same, dusty clothes she had worn on the mountain bike event.

"Well... if you don't feel like going down to the Turkish Bath, you don't have to. As I said, I felt like I was forcing you to go there with me and..."

Sarah sat down at the other end of the couch and observed Joy as she spoke. Joy's jade-green eyes seemed to be very sincere, as were her words, but still Sarah wondered why she had come. Joy's hands were resting in her lap, almost like she was trying not to show her nervousness and on occasion, she was biting the corner of her lip.

'Could it be even remotely possible that she's fishing around for some information? That she's trying to gauge my interest in her? I've only known her for a few days, but I've never seen her so... so insecure. Could it be that she's... interested in me?' Sarah's inner voice said in her ear. A couple of butterflies started flapping their wings in Sarah's stomach.

"So what do you say, Sarah?"

'Shit!' Sarah thought, caught completely off-balance.

"Uhhh... Look, having some guy knead my muscles just doesn't work for me. I really hope you don't mind, but... but it just wouldn't work. OK?"

"OK. Just for the record, they have masseuses there as well."

"Oh..."

"No, it's all right. I understand," Joy said and got up from the couch.

'Wait a minute... was she asking me out on a date? Oh, no, she was asking me out on a date!' Sarah's inner voice said and she mentally gave herself a hard slap on the back of her head.

Joy started walking towards the door with an unreadable expression on her face and Sarah's heart started beating faster and faster.

'Sarah Madeleine Michaels, this is it. It's make-your-mind-up time. Do you want this or not?' Sarah's inner voice said - leaving a message that rang loud and clear through Sarah's mind.

"Hey, Joy, I... I have a much better idea. How about we, uhhh..."

'Think, you stupid moron, think!'

"How about we went down to one of the restaurants and spent our newly won gift certificates? Just you and me? We could meet at..." Sarah said and looked at her bare arm. "Uhhh... at eighty-five, or so? That's after your show, right?"

Joy's eyes lit up like little suns and the corners of her mouth twitched upward. She appeared to take a step closer to Sarah, but then a flash of something raced across her face and her eyes lost some of their luster.

"Oh, I can't tonight, Sarah. There's an important meeting I have to attend down at the theater. It's where we plan the sequence of the acts for the next two-week period and if I'm not there, the Professor will get a poor slot. But how about the same time tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night is good. In fact, tomorrow night is great. Where is that damn thing..." Sarah said, looking everywhere for the brochure containing the list of the restaurants. She finally

spotted it in the small reed basket next to the TV set and she jumped up from the couch to retrieve it.

"Oh, here it is. \$75 will go a long way, so we can take our picks. What do you like?"

"I've heard that the chef at Torre Pendente can perform miracles with veal, but I haven't tried it yet. Perhaps we could go there?"

Sarah found Torre Pendente's entry in the brochure and looked at the pictures. The restaurant had a black and white drawing of the leaning tower of Pisa as its logo and everything appeared to have been designed in a traditional Italian style. It looked very cozy and romantic and Sarah immediately fell for it.

"You bet. We have a da... deal," Sarah said, struggling against breathing a huge sigh of relief. When she saw a warm smile spread out over Joy's features, she matched it with one of her own.

"I better get back to my apartment. I'm beginning to get crusty," Joy said and scratched her cheek.

"Oh, hell, Joy, why don't you just shower here? There's more than enough bathrobes in there... I think there's four or five, or something."

"Really?"

"Sure. Go on, get undre... uhhh, I mean... you know what I mean. I'll get dressed while you shower."

"Great. Thanks," Joy said and went over to stand in the bathroom door. Just before she closed it, she turned to look at Sarah - and smiled so broadly that Sarah's knees turned to Jell-O.

After the door had closed, Sarah buried her face in her hands and groaned quietly.

'You fool... what did you just let yourself into? You better be prepared to deal with the consequences,' she thought.

She shook her head and started walking towards the bedroom - unfortunately, she never made it that far.

Knock, knock

"Yo, Sarah? It's me, Kimmie! Open up will ya!"

Sarah rolled her eyes and threw her hands in the air. She went back out of the bedroom, grumbling loudly to herself on her way to the door.

"Kimmie?"

"Yeah, I wanted to show you something in the... hey, wait a minute... who's in the shower?" Kimberly said as she noticed the familiar sound of running water. She went over to the bathroom door and put her ear to it - from the inside, she could hear a woman humming.

"Joy."

Kimberly suddenly looked down at Sarah's bare legs under the bathrobe and her eyebrows shot up her forehead.

"Way to go, killer! You hounddog, you," Kimberly said and leaned forward to give Sarah a big thump on the shoulder.

"Oh, will ya gimme a break... we've only been back for twenty minutes!"

"Yeah, but I was kinda under the impression that you'd only last twenty seconds..."

"Jeez! Thanks a lot, Kimmie," Sarah said and reached out for Kimberly who quickly stepped aside.

"I wanted to show you where I thought we should eat tonight, but it'll wait. Just enjoy her company, hon. I'll be back later," Kimberly said, backing out of the door with an impossibly cheeky grin on her face.

Concluded in Part 2

**Norsebard's Scrolls
Index Page**

~ Sarah's Choice ~

by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

Disclaimers in Part 1

PART 2

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DAY 5 - WEDNESDAY, MAY 12th

"Dummm-di-dumma-da-di-di-da-dumma-da..." Sarah hummed to herself as she exited her apartment.

"Sarah, hon, are you sure you didn't get lucky last night, 'cos, frankly, I can't remember the last time you were this chipper..." Kimberly said on their way to the Scenic Elevator.

"I'm just in a good mood today, Kimmie."

"Yeah, no shit. Well, I'm glad you finally came to your senses and invited Joy out on a date," Kimberly said and pressed the DOWN button.

"So, anyway, where do you want to eat breakfast?" Sarah said, stretching her aching back.

"How about doing a recon mission at the place you'll go with Joy?"

"The Torre Pendente?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Well, for starters, I sincerely doubt they have pancakes," Sarah said with a cheeky grin.

"We can go over to the King afterwards... but thanks for caring," Kimberly said and nudged Sarah's side with her elbow.

"Ouch!"

"Where the hell's that elevator!" Kimberly said, quickly stepping out of Sarah's reach in case the taller woman decided that the nudge needed a payback.

Once they reached the lobby, Sarah and Kimberly began the long trek that would eventually take them to the Italian restaurant at the other end of the mall.

The entire duration, Sarah kept thinking about the very strange feeling she'd had in her stomach when she saw Joy stepping out of the bathroom, wearing a bathrobe that was several sizes too large for her petite, if fit, frame. Sarah couldn't quite come up with an exact name for that feeling, but she knew that it had given her a severe dose of the warm fuzzies - something that didn't happen often to her.

"Man, you walk like you got your trainers on the wrong foot," Kimberly suddenly said.

"Huh?"

"Your legs are so stiff it looks like you've run the marathon."

"Well, some of us was actually physically active yesterday."

"Hey, I was active, too! While you were away, I took one of the aerobics classes for senior citizens."

"Get outta here," Sarah said and stared at Kimberly.

"No, it's true. 'Put your left foot up, then down...' Sooo corny, but a bit more my pace than that mental Danceroberics nonsense from Sunday."

"Gosh golly almighty, I wish I coulda seen that," Sarah said, earning herself yet another poke in the side.

"Ouch! Man, if you have to poke me, can't you do it somewhere that doesn't ache?" Sarah said and rubbed her ribs.

"Nuh-uh. Where's the fun in that?"

The Torre Pendente was the last restaurant before the fitness section of the mall and when Sarah and Kimberly finally got there, it was crowded almost beyond capacity.

"Well... OK. I sure as hell hope it's not this crowded tonight," Sarah said and looked at the sea of bobbing heads. She scratched her hair and then thrust her hands into her pockets.

"Don't forget we're on a recon mission. You go that way, I'll go this way," Kimberly said, spun around and disappeared into the crowd.

"Kimmie! Wait a min..." Sarah said, but it was already too late. After a few seconds, she shrugged and decided to brave the massive crowd.

As usual, it didn't look quite like the brochure promised, but all in all, it appeared to be a cozy restaurant, held in a typical rustic Italian style. It was clear to see that it was much more upscale than most of the other restaurants in the mall, as the materials and fabrics used were visibly of a superior standard and the staff were all impeccably dressed and surprisingly polite.

Sarah almost missed the display with the menus, and when she saw the prices, she wished that she had. Even the most standard meals were expensive and some were in the triple-digit price range - including the veal Joy had talked about. Sarah sighed and began to feel sorry for her credit card. Even with the \$75 gift certificate, it would get a severe workout on the date.

'I'd be satisfied with two brats and potato salad over at the King, but that would give Joy one hell of a crappy impression of me,' Sarah thought and sighed again.

Sarah suddenly spotted the maitre d' standing at the breakfast buffet and made a decisive cut through the line of people.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Do you have time for a question?"

"Of course, Miss."

"Do you think it'll be possible to get a table at once tonight, or is it necessary to make reservations?"

"At what time, Miss?"

"Eight-fortyfive."

"Oh, we're always quite busy then with people coming from the variety show. I'd reserve a table if I were you," the man said and picked up a small notepad and a pencil.

Sarah scrunched up her face and considered it long and hard - she finally came to the conclusion that she'd make sure this date was one she'd remember for a long time.

"All right, I'd like to do that, please. A table for two."

"Table for two at eight-fortyfive, noted. What name shall I put on the reservation, Miss?"

"Sarah Michaels."

"... Sarah Michaels. Noted," the maitre d' said, making an entry in the notepad.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Thank *you*, Miss."

"There you are... where the heck did ya go?" Sarah said when she finally bumped into Kimberly.

"I've been looking for the menus."

"I'm way ahead of you, Kimmie. I've already made reservations for a table and everything," Sarah said and put her arm across Kimberly's shoulder.

"Great! It's kinda expensive, though... don't you think?" Kimberly said as they left the Torre Pendente and started walking along the central path, heading for the King's pancakes.

"Yeah..."

"We used the \$50 we got for the fire alarm on the drinks the other night, but how much of the big gift certificate did you spend on the helmet and stuff?"

"Uhhh... what are you talking about? I only got the gift certificate after the event..."

"No, not the one from yesterday - the \$100 certificate the uber-cute Professor dug out of your ear... remember?"

"Oh! Jeez, I'd forgotten all about that. Oh yeah, I haven't used any of that. All right, Kimmie... thanks for reminding me," Sarah said and gave the shorter woman an almighty squeeze.

"You're welcome... now let's go chow down some pancakes."

._*._*._*

"I'm restless," Sarah said and got up from the comfy chair. She checked her watch for the fiftieth time since breakfast and rolled her eyes when she saw that it was still only ten to twelve - meaning that she had nearly nine hours to kill before her date with Joy.

"No kidding. I'm surprised you haven't worn a hole in my carpet by now," Kimberly said from her laid-back position on the couch. She had her arms behind her head, using the armrest as a pillow. Her right leg was propped up on the top of the backrest and her left was placed firmly on the low coffee table next to the couch.

With a lazy sigh, she reached for a bowl of potato chips and brought it over. She put the bowl on her stomach and started eating noisily.

"Hey, Sarah, woulda mind handing me the teevee remote?"

Sarah looked at the remote - it was on the table, no more than twelve inches away from Kimberly's hand.

"It's right there."

"I can't reach it."

"There's nothing on, anyway."

"Will ya just gimme that remote!" Kimberly said with a giggle.

Sarah rolled her eyes and walked over to the table to pick up the remote. With a grin, she placed it across Kimberly's forehead and immediately stepped back so she was ready to catch any potato chips flying her way.

"Thank you."

"Anytime, your Ladyship."

"Now slap your butt in the seat and let's watch the noon news," Kimberly said and pressed a button on the remote.

"Ho hum, budget deficit, crisis in the Middle East, politician caught cheating on wife... same-old, same-old," Kimberly said and started zapping to get away from the news station.

"The Price Is Right, Wheel Of Fortune, Jeopardy... Jeez, what's up with all those damn reruns," Sarah said and got up from the chair again. She went over to the window and peeked through the curtains.

Kimberly zapped on, eventually landing on the in-house TruAmerica Channel.

'... on't forget! Thursday night is always Dance Night in the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort. Club Feelgood welcomes everybody to the weekly dance extravaganzas. This week, we have a special event for those of you who were teenagers in the 1990's: A world-class discjockey will perform a live set that promises to be a three-hour revival of the 90's where all your favorites are sure to be played. Club Feelgood opens at ten PM and it's located on the piazza in the Mall, opposite the Prudence Memorial Theater. Tickets are \$5 if you buy in advance, or \$15 at the door.'

"Woohoo, that's where you're taking Joy tomorrow night!" Kimberly said and boogied so hard on the couch she nearly dropped the bowl of chips.

"You have got to be kidding! Me, in a dance club... get a grip, woman."

"No, you gotta go. It'll be great, I guarantee it."

"Hell-lo Kimmie, what part of I Can't Dance Worth A Shit don't you understand?"

"Oh, come on, Sarah. We used to go to clubs all the time back when we were teenagers."

"Yeah, but that was so we could get drunk and gawk at the cute girls. I've never danced," Sarah said and turned back to stare out of the window.

Soon, a potato chip came flying through the air, hitting Sarah right behind her right ear. She sent Kimberly a Death Glare, but it apparently didn't have much of an effect, because another chip soon followed the first one.

"It's not the dancing itself, stupid. It's the... the atmosphere," Kimberly said and ate the next chip instead of throwing it.

"Huh?"

"Oh man, I guess I have to connect the dots for you... Swaying back and forth to the rhythm, holding the gal close, looking into her eyes, letting her run her hands up and down your macha arms, letting her rest her head on your broad chest... you know. The next best thing after sex."

"I wouldn't know," Sarah said and shuffled back to the comfy chair. The TV was showing an infomercial on the TruAmerica channel, but Sarah effectively zoned out. The things Kimberly had said churned through her mind and she couldn't help but imagine a scene where she and Joy were dancing closely. Even thinking about it sent a pack of butterflies hurtling through her stomach, making her squirm.

"D'ya think Joy would be interested in going to the Club?" Sarah said quietly after several minutes of absolute silence.

"I think she'd jump at the chance of going dancing with you, hon," Kimberly said, moving into an upright position on the couch. She put the empty bowl back on the coffee table and wiped off her greasy hands on a napkin.

"I'm afraid she's gonna think I'm too pushy if I ask her out two days in a row."

"Noooo, come on. Enough with the insecurity, OK? Where's the tough gal I know and love?"

"She's on vacation with her best friend, who's constantly giving her a hard time even though she's supposed to be the moral support," Sarah deadpanned.

"And as your moral support, lemme tell you: invite Joy out to the Club. You won't regret it."

"Mmmm. I'll think about it."

"You do that," Kimberly said and leaned back in the couch. She switched off the TV, picked up a magazine and began to thumb through it.

"I need to burn off some energy. Do you wanna go down to the mall? We could check out the senior citizen aerobics class...?" Sarah said and rose from the comfy chair for the umpteenth time.

Kimberly chuckled and put down the magazine on the coffee table.

"Sure. Anythin' for you, darlin'."

Soon, they were back down in the mall, walking briskly towards the aerobics hall. Sarah had donned her Powerboxing outfit again, except that her favorite pair of sweatpants hadn't yet been returned from the laundry service, so she was wearing an old, washed-out pair instead. She adjusted her rainbow-colored wristbands and increased the tempo to a slow jog.

"C'mon, lazy girl. Time to rock'n'roll," Sarah said and suddenly sprinted away from Kimberly who was taking things far more sedately. Kimberly waved her hand dismissively and slowed down to a pace that suited her better.

Sarah raced along the central path, turning heads left and right, or, in some cases, made people shake their head at her antics.

She flew past restaurant after restaurant and didn't slow down until she reached the piazza where the theater and the club were. She jogged around the fountain a few times in the vain hope that Joy would appear, but, unfortunately, the actress wasn't there. Sarah shrugged and continued towards the sports facilities.

Once Sarah reached the aerobics hall, she stopped running and leaned against the wall to stretch the muscles in her calves and thighs. She was still a bit sore from the mountain bike event, but the run had blown away some of the cobwebs in her head. She took a few deep breaths to calm down and then started going through an impromptu Powerboxing routine in front of the aerobics hall.

Suddenly someone whistled at her and Sarah turned around to see who it was. Two twentysomething men had come out from the basketball courts and were busy ogling her. Sarah almost expected them to start drooling at any minute, so she just turned around and ignored them. They whistled again, but seemed to lose interest when Sarah didn't respond and they were soon walking away.

Sarah rolled her eyes and snorted in amusement. Nine out of ten times she was bothered by guys, twentysomethings were the culprits. Somehow, the fact that Sarah wasn't even remotely interested in them had a hard time getting through their hormones.

Sarah chuckled and decided to step up a gear. She went into a series of uppercuts, fakes and jabs and she was ducking and diving like a prize fighter.

Finally, Kimberly arrived at a sauntering pace.

"Hiya," she said, looking over Sarah's shoulder at the large window into the aerobics hall.

"Hi. What kept ya?" Sarah said, stopping her routine. She reached into her holdall and found a towel to wipe off the sweat.

"I have no intention of getting a heart attack just yet," Kimberly said, still staring past Sarah.

"This coming from a woman who's just eaten a bag of chips all by herself... what the hell are you looking at?" Sarah said and turned around - and stopped with a jerk.

The entire senior citizen class were lined up on the other side of the window and they were all staring intently at her. When they discovered Sarah wasn't going to continue her routine, they started clapping at her, much to Sarah's discomfort.

Kimberly quickly stepped over to Sarah and lifted the taller woman's arm high in the air.

"Sarah Michaels, Ladies and Gentlemen!" Kimberly said loudly, making Sarah's discomfort explode into a bout of acute, debilitating embarrassment.

"Nooooo, lemme go, Kimmie," Sarah croaked through clenched teeth, but Kimberly held on tight.

The aerobics instructor Sarah had dubbed the Surfer Dude came out of the hall and put out his hand.

"Wow, what a fab show, Miss. That was one hell of a bitchin' Powerboxing routine," he said, pumping Sarah's arm up and down.

"Thanks. You know it?"

"Sure I do, I'm one of the instructors. The regular instructor for the senior class is on maternity leave, so I'm just moonlighting."

"No shit?" Sarah said, completely forgetting all about Kimberly.

"Oh, no. Hey, you want a job?"

"Uhhh... no thanks, I already got one," Sarah said with a laugh.

"Man, that's too bad. If you ever need to earn a buck on the side, give us a call."

"Will do. Are you doing the high impact class today?"

"Yeah. Starts in ten minutes."

"Sounds good. Come on, Kimmie. Let's go sweat some," Sarah said and put her hands on Kimberly's shoulders so she could push the reluctant woman through the open door.

"Oh, yippie," Kimberly said in a slightly less than enthusiastic tone of voice.

._*_*_*._

"And that's a wrap for today, I'm afraid. You've been a great bunch o' people, but this is the fade-out. Remember to streeeeetch your muscles and to drink some water. Your body will thank you for it," Surfer Dude said and showed the class how to cool down.

The thumping music slowly faded out and the class started gathering up their things. The instructor grinned broadly and sent a thumbsup in Sarah's direction - she returned the gesture and started wiping off her neck and arms with her towel.

"Sarah?"

"Yes, Kimmie?"

"I hate you," Kimberly said and bent over so her lungs would work better - she put her hands on her knees and panted ceaselessly.

"I thought you loved me."

"No, I hate you. That was the.... first time I've ever... tried that Powerboxing nonsense... and it was also... the last time," Kimberly said. She had a hard time finding enough air to speak so the words came in short bursts.

"I don't know what you're talking about. This was just a regular high-impact aerobics class," Sarah said with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek.

"And why did the... instructor do the same moves you... did out front? Hell... I know when I've... been set up. Gawd, I need a beer. A big one. No, a cold one. No, a big, cold one."

Sarah took a long swig of water from her bottle and then presented it to Kimberly.

"You need more water?"

"No, I need a beer. I'm tellin' you right now, we're stopping at a bar on the way back," Kimberly said and threw her thoroughly soaked towel into her bag.

"Well, we better find a table down wind," Sarah said with a chuckle.

"But don't worry, Miss Slave Driver, I have just the right punishment for you. If I ever get back to my apartment..."

"Oh..."

"Yeah. Until now, I've been at your mercy, but now you're movin' into my field of expertise."

"Beer drinking?" Sarah said and quickly evaded the drops of sweat Kimberly flicked at her.

"No," Kimberly said with an evil grin. She moved closer to Sarah and put a hand on the taller woman's shoulder.

"Now we're gonna decide on what you'll be wearing for your date," Kimberly said, breaking out into an evil laugh.

"Oh, joy," Sarah said and made a face.

A little later, Sarah and Kimberly sat down at a remote table in the Holger Danske Scandinavian restaurant and poured cold Carlsberg pilsner into two tumblers. Kimberly held her glass up against the light and marveled at the whiteness of the foam.

"Cheers, Sarah," she said and promptly chugged down half the beer in one gulp.

"Cheers, Popeye."

Sarah proceeded to take a much smaller sip of the cold beer and chuckled at the facial expressions Kimberly made as the strong, imported beer kicked in.

"Ahhhhh," Kimberly said and put down the half-empty tumbler.

"You know, Kimmie, I have to admit that the butterflies are beginning to flap their wings," Sarah said and started to pick at the label on the bottle.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I haven't spent as much time with Joy as you have, but I'm quite sure you don't have anything to worry about, hon. She seems perfectly normal," Kimberly said and drained the rest of the beer.

"Well, duh. I was thinking more about me messing it up somehow. I just know I'm gonna say something stupid," Sarah said and put her elbows on the table. With a sigh, she rested her head on her hands and looked around at the other guests.

"Just be yourself. Everything's gonna work out beautifully," Kimberly said and patted Sarah's hand.

"Be myself. That's what I'm afraid of, Kimmie. I'm not good on dates, did you know that? Somehow, my dates and I always end up misreading each other. And then the women think I'm some kind of deadbeat, or moron... or just out to jerk them around."

"Oh, hon, don't worry so much. Just let it flow and everything's gonna work out. Trust me. And don't forget, you have one advantage over your usual dates."

"What's that?"

"You already know Joy pretty well. I remember you telling me on a couple of occasions that some of your dates had a bit of a Dr. Jekyll/Miss Hyde thing going on."

"Yeah, no shit," Sarah said with a throaty chuckle.

"Have you thought more about inviting Joy to the club tomorrow night?"

"No. And I won't until after tonight. If it goes fine, then maybe. If not, then..."

"But anyway, what are you planning on wearing?"

Sarah groaned and took a long swig from the beer.

"Clothes," she said and put down the glass on the table.

"Do you know what I'd find really sexy?"

"Uhhh... no...?"

"Cowboy boots, black jeans, a black leather belt with a bronze beltbuckle and a black muscleshirt with the words 'Butch4Life' printed in red on the front."

"Good thing I'm not dating you, then. I didn't pack any of those things. Well, I have this one..." Sarah said and pointed at her sweatshirt, "... but there's no time to get it washed."

"Well, it was just a suggestion," Kimberly said with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Yeah, 'just' a suggestion. Jeez, Kimmie, you log onto Fashiontipsforgrrrls-dot-com too often. By the way, I don't recall Ellen ever wearing such an outfit?"

"Oh, she does... on the special occasions," Kimberly purred.

"Too much information, buddy."

"No, here's what we're gonna do. As soon as we get back to the apartment, we're gonna empty out your travel bag all over the floor... and then I'll pick an outfit for you. How's that sound?"

"Messy."

"And classy."

"Kimmie, it's just clothes. Joy has already seen me in filthy sweatpants. I mean, what difference does it make?"

"Clothes Maketh The Woman, Sarah. Especially on a date."

Sarah shrugged and emptied her glass.

"And there's no way out of it?" Sarah said and wiped off her mouth on a napkin.

"The only way out is if you cancel the date," Kimberly said, leaning back in her seat.

"Not gonna happen. OK. Let's go back and... and play house."

"Yeah... hmmm... this doesn't leave me much to work with," Kimberly said and crossed her arms over her chest. The contents of Sarah's travel bag had been dumped on the floor of her apartment and then separated into three piles labeled 'possibly', 'no' and 'hell no'.

"Didn't think I'd be needing a ball gown, ya know," Sarah said from her position in the comfy chair. She checked her watch again - a quarter to six. The butterflies in her stomach had increased to albatross-size and she was feeling decidedly uneasy. She shuffled around in the chair, crossed her legs at the ankles and adjusted her bathrobe so Kimberly wouldn't catch an eyeful.

"Man, you only brought one pair of jeans..."

"That I used for travelling, yes."

"With the Torre Pendente being such a high-class place, the white cotton shorts are out of the picture... hmmm... and you don't have any idea what Joy's gonna be wearing?"

"No. But she's got a room full of clothes she can choose from, so I'll bet she's going to look... riveting."

"In that case, the mission objective is to find an outfit that'll sweep Joy off her feet. Or at least give her a pleasant jolt right where it matters the most," Kimberly said and wiggled her eyebrows.

"Heh. You know what I say, Kimmie?"

"No?"

"When in doubt, go for the classics."

"Blue jeans and a tank?"

"Close. Jeans and a T," Sarah said and got up from the chair. She reached down and picked up the pair of blue jeans and a fresh, red T-shirt and then disappeared into the bedroom.

Two minutes later, she returned, standing in the doorway with her arms spread out like she was on a catwalk.

"What's the verdict, your honor?" she said and turned around.

"Hmmm... adequate."

"Oh yeah?"

"Nah, you look great. Are you gonna wear a bra?"

"Wasn't planning to."

"You should. You don't want to poke out one of Joy's eyes, do ya?"

"Smart-alec," Sarah growled, but went back into the bedroom to put on the aforementioned item.

"Pick a lacy one! Black!" Kimberly shouted, but Sarah just waved her hand.

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"So, it's almost time. Did you brush your teeth? Zip your fly? Remember your wallet and your watch?" Kimberly said as she straightened Sarah's black locks.

"Yes, mom," Sarah said, rolling her eyes at Kimberly's predictable antics.

"... and deodorant... yep. What's it called?" Kimberly said, sniffing the air close to Sarah.

"Hornet."

"Fits ya, killer. But did you remember the most important thing?"

"Uhhh... what's that?"

"A rose," Kimberly said and put her hands on her hips.

"A rose?"

"Of course you're gonna give your date a flower. Man, Sarah, didn't they teach you anything at Butch School?"

"No one has ever given *me* a flower!"

"Perhaps not, but that's no reason not to give Joy one."

"All right. I can do that. What kind of rose?"

"Oh, man... a red one, of course."

"Where the hell do you want me to find a red rose now?" Sarah said and got up from the chair.

"There's a florist down in the mall. We've walked right past him a dozen times already. It's just before the piazza on the way to the Torre Pendente."

"Really? I haven't noticed..."

"No comment. But anyway... you're ready, Sarah. Have fun," Kimberly said and gave Sarah the kind of squeeze the taller woman usually gave to her.

Ten minutes later, Sarah - armed with a single red rose - stepped into the Torre Pendente and went up to the same maitre d' who had helped her in the morning.

"Good evening, Miss."

"Good evening. I've made reservations for a table for two. Sarah Michaels."

"Oh, that's right. Your table is over here, Miss," the man said and led Sarah to a quiet, cozy corner of the restaurant.

The small, square table was placed up against the far wall which was decorated with several classical paintings in golden frames. The table had been set for two and an intricately folded napkin had been placed on each plate. The maitre d' reached into his pocket and found a lighter that he used to ignite the candle on the table.

"Oh, I better tell you right away that I'll be paying with these two," Sarah said and showed the man the gift certificates.

"I see, Miss," the man said, making a small note on his notepad.

"If it's all right...?"

"Oh, of course."

The maitre d' found two menus and placed them on the table. He pulled out Sarah's chair and looked at her expectantly.

"...? Oh, thank you," Sarah said and sat down, blushing slightly over the fact that she hadn't understood what he wanted.

"Do you prefer garlic bread or olive bread, Miss?"

"Definitely olive bread!"

"Noted. Do you want a glass of wine before your dinner date arrives?"

"Uhhh... a glass of white wine, please," Sarah said and put the red rose on the table.

"As you wish, Miss," the man said with a grin as he eyed the rose. He nodded and left the table.

The red rose stuck out like a sore thumb against the off-white tablecloth, so Sarah tried to hide it behind a small menu card advertising a well-known brand of espresso. It still didn't work, so Sarah put it on her lap instead.

She checked her watch - eight-thirtyeight.

At eight-fortyfive sharp, Joy entered the Torre Pendente and quickly spotted Sarah sitting at the table, sipping a glass of white wine. She took the long way round to make sure she approached Sarah from behind.

"Hello, Sarah."

"Hi... oh, Joy!" Sarah said as she turned around. She came to a sudden stop when she realized how fantastic Joy was looking. The actress was wearing black shoes, black flared slacks and a black silk shirt with the top three buttons undone, allowing for a tantalizing look at the very top of her cleavage. Her tanned skin really stood out against the black silk shirt and the white-blonde hair and she appeared to be wearing just the tiniest hint of makeup.

"Omigod, you look..." Sarah said, but the vision left her speechless and she could only shake her head. Suddenly, her decision to only wear blue jeans and a red T-shirt seemed like the worst one she had ever taken and the butterflies all flapped their wings at once.

"Thank you. You look great, too," Joy said as she sat down.

Sarah kept staring at Joy's face for several seconds, until she snapped out of the trance and reached down to find the rose - which had disappeared.

"Oh, cra... I mean, oh, bother," Sarah said and pulled the chair back so she could look for the flower. The rose had rolled all the way over to the far leg of the table and Sarah had to get up to retrieve it. As she passed by Joy, she took a deep breath and had to do a double-take as she recognized the perfume.

"Hey, are you wearing Hornet?" Sarah said as she crouched down to find the flower.

"Yep. You too?"

"Yeah. How's that for a coincidence?"

"Fun," Joy said with a broad smile.

"Where's that damn... oh, here it is," Sarah said as she finally found the rebellious rose. She cleared her throat and stood up straight.

"A flower for a flower," she said, cringing inside at the corniness of the line.

"Ohhhh! It's great. Thank you, Sarah!" Joy said and took the flower. She held it up to her nose and took a deep sniff.

"Oh, it smells great. How romantic," Joy said and her face cracked wide open in the sexiest smile Sarah had seen for years.

"I'm glad you like it. Now let's get something to eat. I'm starved."

"Number twenty-two, roast veal in mushroom sauce, please," Joy said to the waiter.

"Twenty-two, thank you. And you, Miss?"

"Oh, I'll have the same. Hey, I don't suppose it's possible to get mashed potatoes on the side, huh?" Sarah said with a grin.

"Mashed potatoes... no. I'm sorry, Miss. That's not possible. But you can have stir fried potatoes with a dash of oregano and thyme," the waiter said, leaving no doubt as to what he thought of the tall brunette's request.

"Right. I'd like that, thank you."

"Noted. And beverages?"

"Another bottle of this white wine, please," Sarah said and held up the bottle so the waiter could see which one it was.

"Noted. Thank you," the waiter said and made a few notes in his notepad. He nodded curtly and left the table.

"Hey, that went well. Now he thinks I'm an uneducated bumpkin," Sarah said as she watched the waiter walk into the kitchen with their order.

Joy looked left and right and then leaned across the table.

"To tell you the truth, Sarah, I was thinking about asking the same thing," Joy said in a stage whisper.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Mashed potatoes is really underrated."

"Joy, did your meeting last night go well?" Sarah said, taking a long sip of the sweet white wine.

"Yeah, it did, actually. I managed to convince them to keep the Professor as the opening act for another two weeks."

"Good. I have to admit that your act was by far the funniest. It's not that the others weren't trying, they were just... I don't know... dull."

"I have a feeling it's the age difference, Sarah. The Galbraith Twins have been performing since before either of us were born. And they're really nice people backstage."

"I'm sure they are... but honestly, if they did the opening act, I don't think people would want to stay for the rest of the show. You grabbed everyone's attention the second you walked on stage."

"Thank you," Joy said, blushing gracefully. "This is a really nice place, huh?" she said, trying to steer the conversation into neutral territory.

"Yeah. But kinda expensive."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that, Sarah. I'll pay my half of the bill," Joy said with a smile.

Sarah stared dumbfoundedly at Joy and felt her jaw slowly slip down her chest. Suddenly she realized that she was staring and sat up straight.

"Uhhh... no. Thank you, but no. I asked you out, so I'm paying. And besides, I'm actually going to use the gift certificates and that's \$175 right there. That covers the food. We can talk about the wine later."

"Oh, you shouldn't use your gift certificates on me. Can't we spli..."

"I'm paying," Sarah repeated, wearing a firm smile. This was the last thing she had expected - she had gone through a dozen different scenarios how she could mess up the date, but arguing over who should pay had never been one of them.

An awkward silence filled the space between them and Sarah couldn't come up with a single funny thing to say to defuse the situation, so they just sat there, as silent as the stone heads on Mount Rushmore.

Joy smiled shyly and picked up her glass.

"Well, if it's that important to you, I'll gladly accept to be pampered," she said and took a small sip.

Sarah nodded and tore an olive bread in half. She put one half of it into her mouth and started chewing on the dry, tasty bread.

"Listen, Sarah... there's something I'd like to... errr... to ask you," Joy said and put her hand on Sarah's arm.

'Way to go, Sarah. We haven't even eaten yet. You should write a book... How to Foul Up a Date in World Record Time,' Sarah thought and prepared herself for the inevitable rejection.

"Sure?" Sarah said with a sigh.

"You're a little hard to read. Sometimes I think I have you all figured out, but then something happens and you change. I was wondering if... well, if you could maybe give me a few pointers so I didn't have to fumble around in the dark all the time?"

Sarah looked up and locked eyes with Joy. Of all the things she had expected to hear, that wasn't one of them.

"Well..."

Suddenly the waiter arrived with their food and Sarah lost her train of thought. The waiter reached across the table and put down a plate in front of Joy and then Sarah.

"Here you go, ladies. Two roast veal in mushroom sauce with stir fried potatoes. And here's the white wine. Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you," Sarah said and surprised herself by actually managing a weak smile.

"All right. Buon appetito."

"Thank you," Joy said and the waiter bowed and left the table.

Joy went to work on the veal, but Sarah had lost her appetite and she didn't feel like eating at all - instead, she picked up her fork and started pushing the potatoes around.

Sarah felt her insides churn, so she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. On one hand, she dearly wanted to tell the delightful woman sitting opposite her the things that she'd been holding back for years, but on the other, she was afraid of where it might take her. She leaned back in her seat and observed Joy as she ate.

The blonde woman's friendly features gave Sarah the impetus she needed and she took another deep breath.

"Joy, I... I can't give you any pointers because... because I'm still trying to work everything out myself. The brutal truth is that sometimes... well, often, actually... I don't know how to react in

unpredictable situations, or when they develop into something I hadn't anticipated... and then I just..."

"Sarah..."

"No, please, let me finish. And I guess whenever I enter that state of uncertainty, I feel like I'm losing even more control and then I end up doing too little or too much, or... or just the wrong thing altogether... and that always screws up everything."

"Oh, Sarah. I'm so sorry to hear that," Joy said and took Sarah's hands in her own.

"Yeah, well," Sarah said with a shrug.

"But I've seen the real you. And I *like* the real you, Sarah. You have to believe that. We talked so freely on the mountain bike event yesterday... don't you think we had a great time?"

"I had a wonderful time yesterday, but that wasn't in a romantic situation..."

Joy's brow furrowed and she cocked her head, appearing to be in deep thought.

"Sarah, I'm going to ask you a very personal question and if you don't want to answer, I'll understand," Joy said, speaking so quietly that only Sarah could hear it.

"Go on."

"Haven't you ever let go and allowed yourself to fall in love with someone? I mean, really love someone...?"

Sarah locked eyes with Joy again and she knew she didn't have to say more than what her eyes were already telling the actress.

"God... Sarah," Joy whispered shocked.

Sarah shrugged again and looked away, preferring to stare at the untouched expensive meal instead of at Joy's eyes and the look of pity she was sure the actress was sending her.

Joy got up from her chair and immediately stepped over to stand at Sarah's side. Without wasting a moment, she reached down and embraced the surprised Sarah in a crushing hug.

"I never meant to cause you any pain. Please know that," Joy whispered into Sarah's ear.

The waiter came over to see if everything was all right, but a pointed look from Joy made him spin around on his heel and go to another table.

For the first time since she was a little girl, Sarah could feel tears sting her eyes, but she refused to give in to such trivial emotions. She couldn't believe how good it felt to hold Joy like this... or

rather, to be held like this. It had been too long since she had last been with a woman and Joy's powerful presence soothed Sarah's soul - and at the same time, ignited a spark within her that she was afraid that Joy could feel through her skin.

"All right?" Joy said and took a step back. She was still holding onto Sarah's shoulders and she gave them a little squeeze when Sarah didn't answer at once.

"All right," Sarah said in a voice thick with the emotions she was trying to hold back.

"Thank you. Let's start over, OK? Your veal is getting cold and it's actually really good. It'd be a shame to let it go to waste," Joy said and gently thumped Sarah's shoulder.

Twenty minutes later, Sarah finished her meal and she leaned back in her seat more confused than ever. She still didn't understand how it happened, but she knew that sharing her problems with Joy had done her a lot of good, emotionally speaking.

They had talked on while Sarah had eaten, but it had only been inconsequential small talk and Sarah didn't know what to make of that. She felt like she had a serious chance with Joy - but she didn't know how to act on that chance.

Joy wiped off her mouth on her napkin and pushed away her plate. She picked up the bottle of white and poured more wine for both of them.

"Speaking of awful dates, I've had some horrendous ones over the years, too," Joy said and took a long sip of her wine.

"Really? I find that hard to believe," Sarah said with a tired smile.

"Oh, you better believe it. Once, a few years ago, I was with a date in a restaurant very similar to this one and she suddenly excused herself to go to the restroom. All well and good, right?"

"So far, yeah."

"Well, when she came back, she had a tell-tale smear of white powder on her right nostril, right here," Joy said and touched the side of her nose to show what she meant.

"Blow?"

"Probably. In any case, she became so hyper after a few minutes that I just left her sitting there. I'm not sure she ever noticed I was gone."

Sarah chuckled and held up her glass.

"Here's to hopeless dates."

"I can drink to that. And to dates with promise," Joy said and took a sip.

As they drank, they never took their eyes off one another.

"So, Joy... you asked me a personal question, so I hope you won't mind if I ask you one?"

"Of course not. Shoot."

"I don't think I've ever met a woman quite like you. You have both butch and femme elements in your personality and I was kinda wondering what you identified with the most?"

"Hmmm. That's a good question. I guess the bottom line is that I don't believe in labels at all. I'm just myself."

"Good answer."

"I had a difficult time back in my teen years, though. I grew up in a small town you've never heard of in South Dakota and let me tell you, there weren't many lesbians there. It took a lot of fast talking to fit in sometimes. Well, I guess everything worked out fine."

"Where do you live when you're not on the road?" Sarah said, putting her elbows on the table.

"Well, right now, my base is Los Angeles, but I'm not there much. Where do you live?"

"I was born in Frisco, but my family moved to a suburb of Columbus, Ohio when I was very young and I've never left. My parents are still there, too."

"Oh, you're a long way from home, then."

"Yeah," Sarah said and toyed with a corner of her napkin. She leaned back in her seat when the waiter returned to their table to see how things were going.

"Were you satisfied with the meal?" he said, flipping open his indispensable notepad and preparing to make a note of the answer.

"Oh yes, it was magnificent," Joy said - Sarah settled for nodding.

"Can I tempt you with something from our coffee menu?"

"Well... why not?" Joy said, looking at Sarah.

"All right. I could use a coffee," Sarah said, emptying her glass of wine.

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Sarah and Joy were among the last guests to leave the restaurant and when they walked out into the mall, they found it nearly deserted as well.

"Did we fall asleep in there? What time is it, anyway," Joy said and tried to look at her watch.

"It's ten-thirty."

"I don't think I've ever seen the mall this empty. Suits me fine," Joy said and began to search for Sarah's hand. When she finally found it, she entwined her fingers with Sarah's long digits and held on tight.

Sarah felt very surprised, but when Joy looked up and flashed her a broad, genuine smile, Sarah surrendered to the sweet sensation and let the actress determine the pace - metaphorically as well as literally.

"The 11th floor, please," Joy said to the TruAmerica employee manning the Scenic Elevator. He nodded and pressed '11' on the display.

Sarah and Joy both turned around and looked out at the impressive vista. The desert was pitch black, but they could see a few bright spots of light in the far distance. The glass roof of the brightly lit mall quickly disappeared below them, leaving them in the relatively dim lights of the elevator.

They were standing very close and Sarah could feel her heart beating double-time. She knew this evening had been a pivotal moment in her life, but she was still too close to it to really understand what the implications might be.

The little bell in the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

"This is the 11th floor, Miss," the TruAmerica employee said and Joy smiled at him - then she looked at Sarah with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Well... are you coming?"

"Sure...?" Sarah said and allowed herself to be led out of the elevator.

They turned the corner in the hall and went through the door with the frosted glass.

'Man, this hall still looks like it did on Sunday, but I can't believe how much everything else has changed...' Sarah thought as they walked down the hall, heading for Joy's apartment.

Joy stopped outside #1118 and turned around so she faced Sarah. She held the rose close to her face and took a deep breath, breathing in the exotic fragrance of the flower.

"That's funny, I thought you were in 1119?"

"That's my dressing room. This is where I live while I'm here," Joy said and let the rose bud glide over her cheek and down her throat, inching ever closer to the top of her cleavage.

"Oh," Sarah said, transfixed on where the rose was going.

"Sarah, it's been an... an interesting evening."

"I'll say..."

"No, hear me out, please. I can't tell you how glad I am that you trusted me enough to confide in me. I know that must have been hell for you," Joy said and put her hands on Sarah's arms.

"Well..."

"Are you doing anything tomorrow night?"

"Uhhh... tomorrow night? ... I, uh... I might be...."

"There's a 90's revival show down at Club Feelgood and I was sort of wondering if you'd like to go...?"

"You're asking me out, even after the mess I made of tonight?"

"That wasn't a mess at all, Sarah. I had a good time. Honest," Joy said and gave Sarah's arms a big squeeze.

Almost unnoticeably, Joy inched closer to Sarah.

"Well... I have to warn you, I'm a lousy dancer," Sarah said with a shrug.

"No problem. I'll show you a few moves. If you'll let me, of course."

"Oh... sure. It's not until ten PM, is it?"

"No. That's when the doors open."

Joy moved even closer to Sarah and now Sarah definitely noticed it. Her breath hitched, but she was determined not to shy away from the blonde actress.

"Well... OK. See you at ten, then?"

"We have a date," Joy said and zeroed in on Sarah's lips with her eyes.

Suddenly the door to the hallway was flung open and a man and a woman walked in, arguing loudly over something.

With the magical moment ruined, Joy pulled back and inserted the keycard into the door to her apartment.

"See you tomorrow?" Joy said as she opened the door.

"Yep. Tomorrow at ten."

"Can't wait. Good night, Sarah."

"night, Joy. Sweet dreams."

Even after Joy had closed the door, Sarah kept lingering in the hallway for a few moments. Sighing, she thrust her hands deep into her pockets and started walking slowly towards the frosted door and the stairs that would take her down to her own apartment.

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DAY 6 - THURSDAY, MAY 13th

After having tossed and turned for what seemed like forever, Sarah rolled over onto her back and let out a long, slow sigh.

She reached across the bed and activated the light on the small digital clock on the nightstand - 1:39 AM. She sighed again and let her head fall back onto the pillow.

With a grunt, she moved the blanket away and swung her legs over the side of the bed. As she was sitting there, staring out into the darkness, she came to the conclusion that she wouldn't be able to relax enough to fall asleep until she had processed the myriad of thoughts churning on ceaselessly in her mind, so she started wading through the mess, searching for the thread that would unravel the rest.

'Sarah Madeleine Michaels, what is it you want?' Sarah's inner voice said in her ear.

"Want? I want Joy, that's what I want. Emotionally and physically. And I want her to want me. That's all. But just thinking about it gives me a rock-hard knot of fear in my gut. There are so many things that could go wrong," Sarah whispered to herself, thumping her fist down onto the mattress.

Getting off the bed, she walked over to the curtains to peek out, but all she could see was absolute blackness. Yawning, she went into the bathroom to find her toilet bag.

'Maybe this situation will resolve itself. She was about to kiss you when she was interrupted by those bickering people. You have to consider that at least.'

"I do. Gawd, how I wanted her to kiss me... to have her press her lips against mine..."

'If you want her so badly, why do you constantly behave so weird when you're near her?'

"Because I have never met anyone who triggers my fear of the unpredictable more than her. And that scares me," Sarah said, studying her image in the mirror above the wash basin.

'Haven't you been waiting your entire adult life to meet a woman like Joy?'

"Yeah. Now it seems I've found her. And that's exactly why I'm scared," Sarah said, pinching the bridge of her nose. She reached into her toilet bag and found a small vial of prescription sleeping pills.

She tapped on the glass of the vial until two pills fell out into her hand - then she changed her mind and put one of them back in the vial. She filled a small plastic cup with water and brought that and the sleeping pill into the living room where she put them down on the coffee table.

"I'm scared she'll say no, but I'm terrified she'll say yes," Sarah whispered into the darkness as she sat down with a bump in the comfy chair.

'Why?'

"Well... for starters our lives are so different. And then there's the age difference and..."

'Bullshit. It's only four years. Less than your parents. Haven't they had a great life together?'

"More importantly, if we're to have a shot at being happy, one of us has to give up her lifestyle. A long distance relationship never works. And there's no way in hell Joy's gonna give up her ca..."

'More bullshit. You get up in the morning, take the bus to work in a flippin' pencil manufacturing company, take the bus back, watch a Godawful \$2 movie while you're eating a nuked tv dinner, go to bed... repeat ad nauseam. What lifestyle? What life?'

"Oh, shut up. I still need to make a living."

'One of these days you'll have to face your fears. You'll have to accept that unpredictability exists. Love is an organic thing, you know that. Love can't be controlled. Sarah... do you know what the real problem is?'

"Yeah. I've been alone for too long and even worse, I've accepted it. That's it in a nutshell. I'm terrified of taking the leap. Combine it with the other thing and... I'm screwed."

Sarah let out a long, slow sigh and then ran her hands through her hair.

'Is it really worth it? All this confusion and heartache... is Joy really worth it?'

Sarah picked up the pill and the plastic cup. She swallowed the sleeping pill and took several swigs of water to chase it down. She got up from the chair and went back into the bedroom.

As she sat down on the side of the bed, one thought flashed through her mind.

"Yes, she is," Sarah whispered into the darkness.

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"Sarah, hon? It's 9:15. Are you awake? Your best friend Kimberly needs to hear all the saucy details of your date!" Kimberly said loudly and put her ear to Sarah's door.

Suddenly, Sarah opened the door and Kimberly found herself tumbling head-first into the apartment.

"Morning, Kimmie," Sarah said, putting her hand on Kimberly's arm to help stabilize the excited woman.

"When did you get back last night? How did it go? What was Joy wearing? Did she like the rose? Did you kiss her? Hey, you look like shit..." Kimberly said and put her hands on her hips.

"Whoa... one thing at a time," Sarah said, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Didn't you sleep well? Perhaps you didn't sleep at all?"

Kimberly started wiggling her eyebrows like a wannabe Groucho Marx, but Sarah gave her a dismissive shake of the head and turned away.

"I couldn't fall asleep. That's all," Sarah said and sat down in the comfy chair.

"When did you get back? I couldn't hear anything... not that I was listening, of course," Kimberly said while she was throwing herself onto the couch.

"I got back just before eleven."

"So no sex, then?"

"Kimmie!"

"Hey, that's what all the young people do on first dates these days. So I've heard, anyway."

"We talked. I screwed up. Then we talked some more."

"You screwed up?"

"It's a long story and I don't want to talk about it."

"But if you talked some more later on, it couldn't have been too bad?"

"Kimmie..."

"Sorry. So, how was dinner?"

"It was pretty good. We had veal in mushroom sauce. It was great. The wine was good, too."

"Good. Did Joy like the rose?"

"Yeah, she did. Thanks for that tip."

"Oh, you're welcome, buddy."

A very long beat. Sarah was silent, picking at a small abrasion she had on her hand.

"I'm guessing you didn't ask Joy out to the dance tonight?" Kimberly said and put her arm under her head.

"I wasn't going to, but she asked me. I said yes."

"Oh, that's great. That means she's interested."

"Mmmh," Sarah said with a non-committal shrug.

"OK, Sarah, I'm gonna ask you a direct question and I want you to give me an honest answer. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing, really."

"Did you try to kiss her, but she didn't want it?"

"Hell no, Kimmie. We almost kissed, but we were interrupted."

"That's cool. But why the long face, then?" Kimberly said and sat up on the couch.

"Because I'm not... never mind."

"Oh please, Sarah, don't give me that shit."

"I'm just not sure about the whole deal. OK?" Sarah said and got up from the comfy chair. She could feel a headache coming on so she went into the bathroom to find her toilet bag.

"Well, if you say so. Of course, I'd call that bullshit," Kimberly said loud enough for Sarah to hear it in the bathroom.

Sarah came out to stand in the doorway, leaning on the doorjamb. She chuckled when she remembered that she had used that very same expletive several times when she was debating with herself during the night.

"Bullshit?" Sarah said and ripped the top off a packet with headache powder before pouring it into a glass of water.

"Pardon my French, but yes."

Sarah chuckled again and used the butt of her toothbrush to stir the concoction.

"Look, Sarah, you like her and she likes you. Why don't you just see where it takes you?"

"Oh, Kimmie, I..."

"Let me tell you a story. C'mon, sit down," Kimberly said and patted the seat next to her. Reluctantly, Sarah walked over to the couch and sat down, still holding her glass.

"OK. This all happened a long, long time ago in a neighborhood supermarket. One day, a beautiful maiden with ash blonde curls and goddess-like blue eyes walked down the..."

Sarah chuckled loudly and received an elbow in the ribs for it.

"Quiet, please!"

"Ouch... all right, all right..."

"As I said, a beautiful maiden was walking down one of the non-food aisles when she was suddenly and viciously attacked by a heavily armored shopping cart. She was lucky to escape serious injury, but she did get a bump on her ankle and a scrape on her knee."

"What happened then, oh fair maiden?" Sarah said and took a long swig from the glass of water.

"Ahem. That's beautiful maiden, actually. Jeez, I don't know how you can drink that stuff. It tastes awful."

"Yeah, but it works," Sarah said and took another swig.

"But anyway, said heavily armored shopping cart was controlled by a very pretty girl with hazel eyes and auburn hair, who, as it turned out, had just assumed residence across the street from where the beautiful maiden lived."

"Is there a point to all this...?"

"I'll get to that. Well, after a few weeks, the pretty girl and the beautiful maiden met again, in slightly less warlike conditions and they agreed on meeting for a cup of coffee some time. One thing led to the next and pretty soon, they moved in together. And when the two women discovered they shared a few common interests... ahem... the sparks really started to fly."

"Too much information, buddy. Again."

"All right, I'll cut to the chase. One day, the beautiful maiden asked the pretty girl a very important question and the pretty girl said yes. And now, four years later, Ellen and I are still together."

"So...?"

"Oh fer Chrissakes, Sarah! I'm telling you to go for it with Joy. You never know where lightning will strike. I met my gal in a supermarket, you met yours on a stage - but I can see the same look in your eye that I had back then. And still have, for that matter."

Sarah shrugged and started to get up from the couch - Kimberly grabbed her arm and forced her back down again.

"You can't deny you got the hots for her. Go for it... see where it takes you."

"You know, I think I came to the same conclusion last night," Sarah said and put the empty glass on the coffee table.

"Good. And just so you know... I'll be right there to check that you don't chicken out. Every time you see a shadow on the wall, it'll be me!"

"Yes, mom," Sarah said and wrapped her arm around Kimberly's shoulders.

"Sarah, one more thing... and please don't bolt. You said you screwed up. What happened? It couldn't have been too bad?"

"Oh, Kimmie... I really don't..."

"Please?"

"I almost, *almost* got us into an argument over who was paying, but Joy was totally calm about it, thank God."

"What was that all about? I know you didn't forget the gift certificates."

"No and I had already told the waiter I was using them, but Joy insisted that she'd pay her half of the bill."

"And...?"

"Well, I said that I was paying. I guess I said it somewhat strongly."

"And...?" Kimberly said, poking Sarah in the side.

"And, thank God, after a few terrifying seconds, Joy said it was all right with her."

"And...?"

"Hey, I think your needle's stuck, I better give you a bump. Well, after that, we were still on friendly terms and we talked about... well, about a lot of different things."

"Jeez, Sarah. You and I have different definitions of screwing up. I thought you had gone fishing for a meatball down her cleavage, or something."

"Nah."

"All right, lecture over. Now let's go get something to eat 'cos I'm starved. And don't think I'm done grilling you yet. You still haven't told me what Joy was wearing," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue at Sarah. She got up from the couch and smoothed out her T-shirt.

"Oh, she was..." Sarah fell quiet as she remembered how Joy had looked the night before. "She looked quite exceptional," she continued, flashing Kimberly a saucy grin.

Kimberly cleared her throat and put her hands on her hips.

"I want **all** the details, buddy."

Sarah got up from the couch and went over to the sideboard to get her wallet and her wristwatch.

"Well, it's like this. She was wearing..."

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"It just struck me that we only have two more days to go. Man, can you believe how time flies?" Kimberly said as she wiped her mouth on a napkin. She crumpled it into a little ball and threw it on top of the pile of dirty dishes - five plates, two glasses and an empty jug of milk.

Sarah was busy chewing on her last slice of French toast with strawberry jam so she just shrugged.

Kimberly pushed the tray further into the center of the table and leaned back in the seat.

"At least we've seen a lot of different restaurants. This place isn't too bad," she said and looked around at the Holger Danske restaurant.

"The Torre Pendente was much too snooty for my tastes," Sarah said and licked her fingers clean of jam.

"I'm surprised you didn't treat Joy to a couple of Brats."

"Trust me, Kimmie. If it had been my choice, I would've."

"Typical!"

Sarah picked up a small crumb and threw it after Kimberly - who deftly blocked the projectile, making it fall harmlessly onto the table.

"So, what do you want to do today?" Sarah said.

"Well, according to the TruAmerica channel, there's a basketball exhibition slash charity game down at the courts at noon. The local women's team is playing a select group of TruAmerica employees."

"Gawd, the TruAmerica channel... those infomercials make me wanna throw up," Sarah said and made a face.

"Yeah, well, I agree, but they do have interesting info from time to time."

"There's probably going to be a lot of people, but I suppose we could go down there and take a look at it...?"

"Well, we don't have to stay for the entire match. We could sort of drift in and out. It's not like we have anything better to do," Kimberly said, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah. If only it had been a Powerboxing exhibition by Master Lo Yee Ping himself. I swear, he moves so fast you can't see his arms."

Kimberly leaned her head back and let out a long, loud laugh.

"Sarah, Sarah, Sarah... you and your stupid Powerboxing. When we get home, I'm going to make copies of all my Danielle Steel DVDs just to get you to watch something else than those mindless B-movies."

"Any babes in them?"

"Plenty," Kimberly said and got up from the table.

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A few minutes past twelve, Sarah and Kimberly walked into the hall housing the basketball courts.

"Oh, crap, there's a sea of people here already," Sarah said as soon as she saw the incredibly large crowd.

"I can't even see the court itself. Have the players arrived yet?" Kimberly said, trying to jump up so she could see something apart from broad backs.

"No. Oh, wait a minute... I think they're coming now. Hey, they're gonna walk right past us," Sarah said, grabbed Kimberly's shoulder and turned the shorter woman around so she could see the approaching players.

A squad of TruAmerica employees carved a path through the excited spectators and Sarah and Kimberly ended up standing first in line to see the basketball players.

"All right, Go Team!" Kimberly shouted as the first of the tall, powerfully built women filed past her.

As they went past the packed spectator enclosure, the players waved and threw little trinkets out to the waiting crowd. One of the players came over to Sarah and held up a keychain with the team's logo. Sarah responded by smiling broadly and nodding her head slightly so the player could slide the chain around her neck without getting it caught up in Sarah's hair.

"Thanks!" Sarah said, making the player turn around and wink at her.

A few minutes later, the two teams were busy warming up and Sarah and Kimberly searched high and low to find some good seats.

"I swear to God, Sarah, more than half of those women were Sisters."

"No shit, Kimmie."

"Did one of them wink at you?"

"You betcha."

"Lucky devil. Oh, two seats! Right there!" Kimberly said, pointing at two vacant seats not far from where they were standing. She threw herself ahead and managed to capture them before anyone else could.

"Over here, dahling!" she said loudly, earning herself a few sniggers from the surrounding spectators.

Sarah lumbered over to Kimberly and sat down next to her.

"Great. We can see the whole court from here..." she said, trying in vain to get comfortable in the hard plastic seat.

"Hi, guys. We gotta stop meeting this way," a female voice said in Sarah's ear, nearly making her jump a foot in the air.

"Hi, Joy. You couldn't resist the basketball babes either, huh?" Kimberly said.

"Nope. Hi, Sarah."

Sarah put her arm across the back of Kimberly's chair and turned around so she faced Joy.

"Hi, Joy," Sarah said and gave the actress her most winning smile. Joy responded with a very similar one and Sarah immediately tapped Kimberly on the shoulder.

"Uhhh... Kimmie?"

"I get it, I get it. Joy, come down here. Let's swap," Kimberly said and got up from her chair.

After the first quarter - that had ended 41-5 in favor of the professional team - Sarah lost interest in what happened on the court and began looking at Joy instead. She let her eyes drift slowly up the actress' lithe body, from her bare feet in sandals, past her tanned and well-shaped calves and thighs, the navy blue cotton shorts, the baby blue tank top and up to the shock of white-blonde shaggy hair.

Once Sarah's eyes had reached the top of Joy's head, she started to look away, but before she had time to do so, Joy turned her head and locked eyes with her.

Had this been at any other point in Sarah's life, even as late as the afternoon of the day before, she would've blushed like crazy and looked away instantly, but now she kept her eyes trained on Joy's jade-colored orbs. Sarah grinned guiltily and felt her stomach do a strange flip-flop when Joy reciprocated the grin.

Joy leaned in and put her lips to Sarah's ear to make herself heard above the raucous crowd.

"Gotcha!"

"Guilty as charged, your honor. Caught me red-handed, too."

"This is dull. Come on, let's go outside and talk," Joy said, tugging at Sarah's arm.

"OK. Hey, Kimmie, we're just gonna... uhhh..."

"I know. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Kimberly said and gave Sarah a double thumbsup.

By the time they had forced their way through the throng of spectators, Sarah's ears were ringing and her feet were sore - more than one person had mistaken her trainers for the carpet. They walked across the central path, headed for the bench outside the aerobics hall.

"Man, that last dude musta weighed a ton," Sarah said and tried to curl up her toes to see if they were still attached to her foot.

"Somebody pinched my butt on the way out," Joy said, laughing out loud.

"What? How rude! Who was it? If we can find him, we can..."

"Calm down. It could've been anybody. I'll live," Joy said and put both hands on Sarah's arm.

"I hate to be in the middle of large crowds."

"Me, too, actually. Kinda funny once you think about it. If I don't have large crowds to my shows, I'm in trouble."

"Yeah. I'll bet that hasn't happened often?" Sarah said and crossed her legs at the ankles.

"Well, not often, but it has happened. A couple of years ago, I was in a travelling show. We were visiting a small town in Missouri, but they apparently didn't like our sense of humor so they stayed away. We only did two nights there and then we had to leave for the next town."

"Did you do the Professor?"

"No, it was more of an experimental show."

"Oh... I'm not good with those, either. I'm more of a... uhhh... an old-fashioned girl."

"Old-fashioned girls are cool, too, Sarah," Joy said and nudged the taller woman with her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Sure. How about a cup of coffee? I could use one."

"Coffee would be great. Say, Joy, have you ever been to the Sausage King?"

Ten minutes later, Sarah and Joy were sitting at a corner table in the Sausage King, sipping from two large mugs.

"This is great coffee. I didn't know European coffee tasted that different to our own?"

"It depends on how the beans are grounded. This is pretty good," Sarah said and took a long swig from the mug.

"Electronic music or rock'n'roll?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's just a little game I play sometimes. Either-or, you know?"

"Oh, right. Well, I listen to whatever's on the radio. I don't have a large music collection, actually. Do you?"

"Not really. I have a handful of CDs in the van for the endless highways, but that's it, basically. Now go ahead, ask me a question."

"Uhhh... I don't know!" Sarah said with a laugh.

"It could be anything, it doesn't have to be smart."

"OK, coffee or tea?"

"Both. Coffee in the morning, tea in the afternoon. Boxers or briefs?"

'What did she just ask me?' Sarah's inner voice said.

Sarah's eyes grew wide open and she started choking on a mouthful of coffee. Joy quickly jumped up, ran around the table and slapped Sarah's back several times.

"Gawd..." Sarah croaked, trying desperately to wipe spilled coffee off her chin with her hand.

"Sorry, that was cheeky of me," Joy said, still patting Sarah's back.

"Man..."

"We better stop playing, huh?"

"Nah, it's all right, I just have to find my other lung," Sarah wheezed, coughing hard to get all the liquid up.

"I'll behave, I promise."

"I can't believe you asked me that..." Sarah said, dabbing a napkin against a coffee stain on her T-shirt.

"Sorry. You didn't answer," Joy said with a cheeky grin.

"Uhhh... it depends on what I feel like wearing that day. I generally don't follow a dress code. Joy, I'm not really good at talking about such personal stuff, so would you mind if we didn't talk about things like my underwear...?"

"Of course not," Joy said with a chuckle.

Sarah put a finger inside the top of her T-shirt and held it out to get some cool air down her front. For no good reason at all, the temperature had suddenly risen several degrees and Sarah knew her face was redder than a lobster's rear end. When she looked at Joy, she saw a very cheeky gleam in the actress' eyes and she couldn't help but wonder what it was she was letting herself into.

"Hey, I'm really looking forward to tonight, Sarah. It's gonna be so much fun."

"Don't get your hopes up too high. The way I dance, you may not have two feet afterwards."

"How come you don't dance? You have such wonderful legs," Joy said with yet another cheeky grin.

Sarah leaned across the table and lowered her voice so only Joy could hear what she said.

"You've been flirting with me ever since last Sunday, haven't you?"

"I thought you'd never catch on. I was getting worried that I was losing it," Joy replied in an equally quiet voice.

"Well, it took me long enough."

"When did you notice?"

"Just now."

Joy immediately covered her mouth with her hand to try to suppress the throaty laugh that threatened to escape her chest. She was successful to a certain degree - although she couldn't hold back a few chuckling sounds, she didn't laugh out loud in Sarah's face.

"O... K..." she managed to say after a few seconds.

"Yeah, but don't worry. I'm playing with a full deck now," Sarah said, pushing her mug around the table.

"That's good. When do you want to meet tonight?"

"How about a quarter to ten at your apartment?"

"OK."

Joy looked left and right in a very secretive fashion. When she was sure no one could hear her, she whispered,

"Last question in the game: Underwear or no underwear?"

"Oh, God, Joy! You're killing me," Sarah said and clapped her hands over her eyes.

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"Now I know how my mom felt at my prom," Kimberly said as she helped Sarah get ready to go to the club. She straightened Sarah's collar and smoothed it with her hand.

"That bad, huh?" Sarah said and promptly tugged the collar of the white long-sleeved shirt the other way.

"Nah. Are you nervous?"

"No. Amazingly enough, I'm not. I have a good feeling about tonight."

"That's when things go wrong."

"Jeez, Kimmie..."

"I'm just saying it as it is, Sarah. Things always go wrong when you're too relaxed. It nature's way of letting us know that we've been slacking."

"I'll try to remember that. And besides, I'll be... gulp... dancing. I have plenty of opportunities to screw up."

"Well, that's good to hear, hon," Kimberly said and patted Sarah's hand.

Sarah chuckled and moved over to the mirror to check herself out. Never in her wildest dreams would she have expected to be in such a position after a week at the comically named 'TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort'.

"Yeah, you look fab. You're hot to trot. You're ready to be the boogiebabe. Do you know if they elect the Disco Queen? If they do, you're a shoo-in."

"Gawd, I hope not. I hate those stupid contests," Sarah said and adjusted her beltbuckle so it aligned with the zipper of her blue jeans.

This time, Sarah was going all out. It hadn't done her credit card any good, but she had decided to splash out on a very nice white denim shirt and a new leather belt with a large, yet tasteful, beltbuckle.

It had been years since she had bought clothes just to look good on a date, but she didn't want to revisit that sinking feeling she had felt when she was sitting in a dull, red t-shirt and Joy was looking like a bombshell.

Sarah buttoned the cuff links and tugged at the sleeves so they were in place. Then she opened the top button of the shirt and put her hands on her hips.

"All woman! And that's Woman with a capitol Dub'ya!" Sarah suddenly said to her reflection in the mirror - that, unsurprisingly, didn't offer any other view.

"Whoa, calm down, Tiger. You're gonna bust the mirror if you keep sending out such high levels of estrogen," Kimberly said, holding up her hands.

"You know, Kimmie, I'm surprised that it didn't even feel odd to walk into the fashion boutique down in the mall... even though it's called Femme's Delight."

"They still don't know what hit 'em. Listen, are you only going to have one button open?"

"Yeah."

"Two would look better... or even three."

"Hell, no. It stays at one."

"Two."

"One."

"Two. Come on. It'll look sexy," Kimberly said and reached up to open the second button. She put her hands on Sarah's shoulders and pushed the taller woman back in front of the mirror.

"Yeah... I guess. OK," Sarah said and looked at her reflection.

"Oh, my baby... you grow up so fast," Kimberly said and pretended to sob.

"Jeez!"

"Go knock her off her feet, killer. And afterwards, I wanna hear *all* about it," Kimberly said and gave Sarah a pat on the butt.

"Oh, wow, you look fantastic tonight, Sarah," Joy said when she opened the door to her apartment.

"Thank you. You look really great as well," Sarah said, looking at Joy's dark green jeans and dusty crimson spaghetti strap tanktop that really brought out her well-toned shoulders.

"Thanks. I'll be right there, I just need to..." Joy ducked back into the apartment and took a blazer from a hallstand. "... grab my jacket. I'm ready."

When the clock struck ten PM, the doors to Club Feelgood were opened and the medium-sized gathering of people that had assembled outside were let in one at a time, all receiving a purple stamp on the back of their hand to prove they had paid the entry. Sarah and Joy were towards the back of the line, but it didn't look like there would be any problems getting in so Sarah didn't worry at all.

"Sarah, this time I asked you out, so I'm paying," Joy said, found her wallet and took out three \$10 bills.

"Okie-dokie. According to the poster, the 'world-class' discjockey they promised us is someone called DJ Lenny. Never heard of him."

"Me, neither," Joy said and sought out Sarah's hand. Once she had found it, she started swinging her arm back and forth and Sarah felt herself being flooded with the warm fuzzies all over again. They looked at each other and started grinning.

'Careful, Sarah. You're about to cross the point of no return,' Sarah's inner voice said in her ear.

A little more than ten minutes later, the unknown 'world-class' DJ had begun his set and Sarah had to admit that he knew what he was doing. A lot of people were already dancing, but she and Joy were still sitting in one of the booths that lined the outer rim of the dancefloor.

The club was very much like any other dance club - a mirrored ceiling so the multi-colored lights would be reflected off the spinning disco ball, some kind of heavy-duty carpet on the dancefloor and a raised podium at the far end of the room where the DJ was working.

Joy was boogieing along to the beat of the music and Sarah knew that she couldn't put off the inevitable much longer. She took a deep breath and leaned in towards Joy.

"Joy... care to dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask. C'mon!" Joy said and pulled Sarah out of the booth and onto the dancefloor.

The moment they hit the floor, the DJ segued into La Bouche's Be My Lover and Joy **really** got on with it. She was shimmying, shaking, twisting, turning and five other things all at once.

Sarah just stood there like the Colossus of Rhodes, staring at the dancing sensation before her and marveling at how limber and just plain sexy Joy was. Sarah knew she was attracting attention to herself, so she started moving to the beat to the best of her abilities. Compared to Joy, she looked like a lump of concrete and moved with less grace than a fish flapping around on dry land, but after a few minutes, she forgot all about that and just let go.

Twenty minutes or so later, Sarah was on the brink of exhaustion, so she made her way from the dancefloor and back to the booth she and Joy had been sitting in before. Just before she sat down, she noticed that while they had been away dancing, the booth had been occupied by a young couple who were snogging heavily.

Joy soon left the dancefloor and quickly caught up with Sarah, who was still searching for somewhere to rest her weary legs.

"Tired?" Joy said, shouting to be heard over the thumping music.

"Wiped out!"

"Let's go sit down at the bar. I'll buy you a drink."

"Sounds good to me. Lead on," Sarah said and put out her hand. Joy took it and led Sarah towards the neon-lit bar at the far end of the club.

"Good evening. What can I get ya," the bartender said.

"Hiya. I'll have a Screwdriver. Sarah, what's your poison?"

"Uhhh... Pink Demon if ya have it."

"Pink Demon? Sorry, don't know that one," the bartender said as she began to mix Joy's Screwdriver.

"Oh."

Sarah tried really hard to remember what the drink had been called down at the place with the female bartender who was dressed in a pirate suit, but the loudness of the music impaired her thinking.

"What's in it?" the bartender said.

"Huh? Oh, Schweppes pink grape and vodka and the glass has a sugar-coated rim."

"Can't help you, I'm afraid. I don't have any Schweppes."

"Shit. Make it two Screwdrivers, then."

"You got it. That'll be \$20."

"Here ya go," Joy said and handed the bartender two \$10 bills.

"Thank you," he said and put the bills in the cash register. He finished the drinks and put them on the counter.

Sarah and Joy took their glasses and went over to a vacant booth near the bar. Joy slid in first and Sarah soon sat down next to her.

"You said you can't dance, but I thought that went really well," Joy said.

"Naw, that wasn't dancing. That was wiggling back and forth in a semi-circle. You, on the other hand... man, *that* was dancing."

"Thanks."

"Gawd, I wish I was as limber as you," Sarah said and took a swig of the Screwdriver. She found that it was pretty good, if not quite as professionally put together as the three Pink Demons she'd had the other day.

"Don't you do that... what was it called, Power-something...?"

"... boxing. Powerboxing, yeah. But that's not the same. That's more a combination of aerobics, traditional boxing and martial arts. Hey, if you're not busy tomorrow, perhaps we could take the high-impact class together?"

"Oh, I'd love that," Joy said and took a long swig from her glass. She let her hand slip into the darkness under the table and casually let it fall onto Sarah's jeans-clad thigh. She clawed the thigh a few times and then turned to look at Sarah with a gleam of expectancy in her eyes.

Sarah's heart suddenly started beating so hard she was sure Joy could hear it over the thumping music. Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips to get them a bit moist in case Joy was going to kiss her - as if on cue, Joy leaned in and let her lips brush lightly across Sarah's. The sweet feeling caused the butterflies in Sarah's stomach to flap their wings but she was determined not to listen to them.

Joy pulled back and looked deeply into Sarah's eyes. Their faces were only an inch apart and suddenly the rest of the world just vanished. Joy's eyes flicked down to Sarah's lips - and then she moved in to claim those lips in a kiss that started gentle but soon turned fiery.

Sarah put her hand behind Joy's head to pull her even closer and soon, they were completely lost to the world. Initially she was surprised by Joy's ravenous appetite, as it seemed the blonde woman was intent on devouring Sarah completely, but she soon let go and started to match the intensity of Joy's kiss.

Joy deepened the contact even further and began to probe Sarah's lips with her tongue. Finally convincing Sarah to open up, Joy entered Sarah's mouth and their tongues engaged in a fast, sensual dance that immediately created needy whimpers and moans in both Sarah and Joy.

All too soon, they had to break off the kiss to get some air and Joy rested her head against Sarah's forehead, purring contentedly.

"Wow..." Sarah croaked, very much out of breath. She moved her hand down from the back of Joy's head, onto her shoulder, then down her arm and finally ending up on top of Joy's hand that was still lingering on Sarah's thigh.

Sarah's entire body was humming with an energy she hadn't felt in years. Every single part of her tingled, and deep inside her, a fire had been ignited that she knew only one thing could extinguish.

"Mmmmmhhwow," Joy repeated with a grin.

"It's been so long I was afraid I'd lost that skill," Sarah whispered, licking her lips.

"You haven't."

The rest of the world slowly came back and they could hear the DJ announcing that the next twenty minutes would be for the people who wanted to dance close. Joy's eyes lit up and she grabbed Sarah's hands.

"Come on, Sarah. Please..."

"One moment," Sarah said, gulping down the rest of her Screwdriver.

Soon, they were swaying gently to Whitney Houston's cover of I Will Always Love You, with their hands on the other woman's hips and looking so deeply into each other's eyes that everything else became a distant, multi-colored blur.

Joy wrapped her arms around Sarah's waist and pulled her impossibly close. She slid her hands into Sarah's back pockets and gave the taller woman's buttocks a little squeeze - a gesture that made Sarah's eyes pop wide open for a few seconds. Sarah looked down and saw Joy's jade-green orbs sparkle in the dim light and once again she thanked all the lucky stars she could think of.

The song segued into the next, but Joy didn't seem to want to stop. She sighed and let her head rest across Sarah's chest.

Joy's hands on Sarah's butt and her face near Sarah's breasts added more fuel to the fire that was already brewing within her, and Sarah could feel her nipples begin to tighten. She moved her hand up to gently claw at Joy's hair and neck and she was rewarded by a blinding smile that did nothing to quell the flames.

The dance floor was packed with people kissing and dancing close, but Sarah didn't feel like kissing Joy in front of all those strangers so she gradually pulled her off the floor and towards the booths.

"C'mon, let's sit this one out," Sarah said as the song segued into the next one.

They quickly found a vacant booth and continued where they had left off earlier. After a minute's worth of passionate kissing, Joy took off her jacket and put it on the bench.

"Phew, it's hot in here, huh?" she said, fanning her face.

"Yeah... hot," Sarah said, too preoccupied with Joy to think about anything else. They started kissing again and Sarah's hands soon began to roam on their own accord. Suddenly, Sarah found herself gently kneading one of Joy's breasts.

Joy's breath hitched and she opened her eyes. She put a hand on top of Sarah's and pulled it away.

"Not yet, Sarah... please," she said in a voice that was friendly, but firm.

Sarah blushed furiously and removed her hand like she'd been burned.

"God, I'm sorry, Joy... I'm, I'm... so sorry," Sarah said into Joy's ear and immediately moved back from the actress. She wiped off her brow and mentally slapped herself hard across the cheek.

"Perhaps we should go outside and get some fresh air?" Joy said and took her jacket.

"Yeah... I think that... would be fine," Sarah said, quickly sliding out of the booth and walking away.

With determined steps, Sarah walked across the dancefloor, past the TruAmerica employee working as a bouncer and out of the club.

Once she was out in the mall, she put her hands on her hips and took several very deep breaths. She checked her watch - it was only two minutes to eleven. She sighed deeply and ran a hand through her hair, which was slightly damp after all the dancing and heated kissing.

'Dumb, dumb, dumb, you moron! Way to go, Sarah. You come off like some sex-crazed rabbit with a one-track mind. Jeez, what were you thinking... groping her boob in the middle of a club. If someone had tried that stunt with you, you would've kicked their teeth out. And everything was going so well up until then... Jeez!'

Sarah paced back and forth, most of all wanting to brain herself by thumping her head into the club's outer wall until her face was a bloody mess, but Joy arrived before she had time to do it.

"Joy, I'm really sorry. I was way out of line. Please accept my apology."

"Come on, it's all right. Really it is," Joy said and put on her jacket.

"No it's not. I got carried away and I did something stupid. Please forgive me."

"Well, sure I forgive ya. You were kinda eager there..." Joy said teasingly, poking Sarah in the gut with her index finger.

"Yeah. The eager beaver, that's me. I'm sorry I ruined it. Again."

"No, you didn't. Come on, Sarah, lighten up. Everything was just going a bit too fast, that's all. I had a great time."

"Really?"

"Hey, wasn't that my hands caressing your butt? Or my tongue in your mouth?" Joy said with a cheeky grin.

"Uhhh... yeah. On both accounts."

"Do you wanna go back inside? We both have the purple stamps, so we're allowed to go back in if we want."

"Well... I guess we could do that. The DJ isn't that bad, actually."

"No and the girl I was with was even better," Joy said and wiggled her eyebrows.

"You really think I'm a good kisser?"

"Hell yeah," Joy said and hooked her arm inside Sarah's.

Joy looked around to see if they were alone - satisfied that they were, she pressed Sarah up against the outer wall of the club, stood up on tiptoes and placed a quick kiss on Sarah's lips.

"Just to prove that I'm not upset, or anything," Joy whispered in Sarah's ear.

"Mmmmm. I promise I'll keep my hands to myself from now on," Sarah said and gave Joy a quick peck on the cheek in return.

Through the wall, they could hear the DJ announcing that the next period would be up-tempo tunes and Corona's Rhythm Of The Night soon thumped out of the speakers.

"Perhaps we should stick to dancing for a little while... whaddaya say?" Joy said and started tugging at Sarah's sleeve.

"Well... all right. You got me," Sarah said and followed Joy back inside.

They showed their stamps to the bouncer and were let in without problems. The dancefloor had filled up quite a lot for the faster tunes, but Sarah and Joy managed to squeeze in between the dancers and were soon shaking to the groove.

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DAY 7 - FRIDAY, MAY 14th

"Gee, Kimmie, do you think you have enough pancakes there?" Sarah said when she saw the stack of pancakes on the plate that Kimberly was carrying down to their table in the Sausage King.

"It's only five. Long live the King," Kimberly said and sat down. She opened a small bottle of syrup and poured it all over the pancakes.

"I don't understand why you don't want some cereal instead. It's much better."

"For you, maybe. For me, nope," Kimberly said and went to work on the pancake at the top of the pile.

Sarah chuckled and dug her spoon into her Cornflakes.

"So, hon... what happened last night?" Kimberly said.

"Oh, a lot of things."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Uhhh... yeah," Sarah said with a telling grin.

"Good. What did she taste like?"

"Kimmie!"

"That's a perfectly innocent question."

"No it isn't."

"Anyway. And you danced?"

"Oh, yeah, I danced. I wiggled my butt with the best of them... but, Jeez, you shoulda seen the moves Joy pulled. Oh, man, she was... hmmm-hmmm!"

"That good, huh?"

"No, better."

Kimberly chuckled and started carving up her second pancake.

"Hi, guys. I knew I could find you here," Joy said and gave Sarah and Kimberly a little wave.

Sarah stopped chewing and just looked at the blonde woman. The images of all the kisses they had shared the night before came flooding over her and she felt her face grow hotter by the second. She licked her suddenly dry lips, disguising it by digging into her cereal.

"Hi, Joy," Sarah said around a mouthful of Cornflakes.

"Good morning, Joy. Did you have a good time at the club last night?" Kimberly said.

"Ohhhhhh yeah. It was... quite special," Joy said, looking directly at Sarah, who responded by blushing furiously.

"Mmmmm?" Kimberly said and turned her head to look at Sarah. She bared her teeth in a cheeky grin that Sarah knew would spell trouble for her later on.

Joy stepped into the restaurant and suddenly Sarah noticed that the actress was limping.

"Hey, what happ..." Sarah started to say, but was then interrupted by a loud growl from Kimberly.

"Sarah Michaels! Did you do that?" Kimberly said, putting both hands on the tabletop.

"Huh... do what?"

"Please tell me you didn't do that... what did you do? Did your size 16 boots break the poor woman's toes... her foot... her ankle... what?"

"Kimmie, I didn't do anyth..."

"You stepped on her, didn't you?"

"I did not!"

"Someone must have! Look at how much the poor woman is limping," Kimberly said, throwing her hands in the air.

"Well, the poor woman has a perfectly good excuse if she was allowed to get a word in...?" Joy said, stifling a snigger over Kimberly's uncharacteristic hissy fit.

"Please do," Sarah said, shaking her head slowly.

"It happens sometimes. I have slightly weaker ligaments on that foot, so if I overstress it, this is the result. Sarah didn't step on me, Kimberly."

"Oh... well, she could have."

"But I didn't. Thanks a lot, Kimmie!"

"Hmmm," Kimberly said and knifed the third pancake.

"Anyway... Sarah, as you can see, I can't go to the aerobics today. I hope that's all right?"

"Oh, sure. Do you want to do something else instead, or... or do you just want to have a day of mellow relaxation?"

"Well, I was planning on asking you if you were interested in going up to the rooftop swimming pool with me...?"

"Yes," Sarah said and pushed away the bowl of cereal before Joy had even finished the sentence.

"Well, you can eat up first," Joy said with a laugh.

"Oh... right. Have you eaten? We have plenty of room if you want to grab a quick bite of something. I've heard from reliable sources that their pancakes are great."

"Thanks, but I don't need much in the morning. A cup of coffee and I'm ready to face the day."

"Unlike some people," Sarah said, making a pointed reference to Kimberly, who had almost finished her third pancake.

"Oh, ha, ha. Anyway, sorry that I accused you of something you didn't do, Sarah. It was just the first thing that came to mind when I saw Joy was limping... I mean, knowing the weird moves you pull when you're trying to dance," Kimberly said, returning the favor with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"Well, Kimberly, for your information, I thought Sarah was actually a pretty good dancer last night," Joy said, putting her arm around Sarah's shoulder. She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Sarah's left ear and then moved her hand up to muss Sarah's black locks.

Sarah knew that Kimberly's eyes were burning into her, so she looked down at the bowl of cereal, trying to get the last few Cornflakes up onto her spoon.

"Gosh golly almighty, I better make a note of that in my diary. I don't think I've ever heard anyone say that before," Kimberly said with a chuckle.

"Anyway, you wouldn't mind if we went up to the pool, would you?" Joy said, still holding on to Sarah.

"Hell, no. Go on, have fun. Sarah, don't forget to sit in the shadow."

"Yes, mom," Sarah said.

"Did you see the sign at the Holger Danske restaurant? At half past twelve, they'll be serving a Scandinavian smorgasbord lunch buffet. And that's where I'll be. I gotta sample a few of those coldcuts before we leave."

"I didn't see that sign...?"

"You don't see much, do you?" Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue. Joy chuckled and mussed Sarah's hair again. She looked at Kimberly and gave her a little wink.

Twenty minutes later, Sarah and Joy stepped out onto the sun deck of the high-rise and quickly discovered that they had the entire swimming pool area to themselves. The protective cover was still on the pool, so it looked like the TruAmerica employees weren't expecting any visitors so early in the day.

"Nice. No twentysomethings here to gawk at us," Sarah said as she looked around.

"Well, except me," Joy said with a laugh.

"Uhhh... I meant guys. Looks like we'll have to take the deck chairs ourselves. Allow me," Sarah said and went over to the depository at the far end of the pool.

"Oh, you don't have to..."

"I insist," Sarah said as she took a white deck chair and carried it over to a small table overlooking the pool.

"Here ya go, Joy. Have a seat."

"Thanks," Joy said, flashing one of her trademark genuine smiles. She limped around the deck chair and sat down.

As soon as Sarah had checked that Joy was safely seated, she went back to the depository and found another chair that she placed very close to Joy's.

"We're all set. Oh, no we ain't... I forgot something," Sarah said and got up from her deck chair. She ducked under the fringes of the parasol and found the trigger that would open it. With a firm shove, the large umbrella-like structure opened up like a blossoming flower, effectively blocking out the sun.

"Much better," Sarah said, dusting off her hands. She sat down in her deck chair and looked at Joy.

"Thanks again," Joy said. She reached out for, and found, Sarah's hand. Giving it a little squeeze, she then pulled it close so both their hands were resting across her stomach.

"You're welcome."

"Have you had problems with guys bothering you? You know, that thing you said about twentysomethings?"

"Well... yes and no. Never anything major, but they always have a really hard time understanding that I'm not interested."

"Typical."

"Yeah. You?"

"Nah. Not really."

"I'm glad to hear it. I wish I had half the guts you have, though."

"Huh? Regarding what?"

"Well... that bikini you were wearing last Monday. Gawd..." Sarah said, grinning cheekily.

"I happen to like that bikini. Do you think it was too much?"

"... No. it was too little. You know, it's funny, but when Kimmie saw you in that two-piece, she didn't believe you were interested in girls," Sarah said, laughing out loud.

"Ha! I hope I convinced you otherwise last night...?"

"Uhhh... yeah," Sarah said, suddenly blushing all over again.

"Well, it's like I said the other day. I don't believe in labels. I do what I want to do and I wear what I like to wear."

"Even dresses?"

"Mmmmmhh, not really. I've done a couple of shows where the character called for a dress, but that was... weird," Joy said and started playing with Sarah's fingers.

"I'll bet. I'm glad we don't have a dress code where I work. If they forced me into anything uber-feminine, I'd quit on the spot."

"You said you're a secretary, but you haven't told me where you work?"

"Oh, it's just... it's nothing compared to your line of work," Sarah said with a shrug.

"I'd still like to hear about it."

"Well, it's called BenCo Office Supplies. Basically, we make pencils and some other small things for offices."

"Hey, that's cool."

"No, it isn't. It's as dull as dishwater. I do the same things most every day. Filing, taking dictation, typing letters, you know... common garden variety secretary stuff. Sometimes I feel that the coffee breaks are the best parts of my day."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well... it's a living. Last year, I started looking for something else, but then we had the financial crisis and all that shit. It's just too risky to look for a new job now."

"I understand."

"How about you? Are you going to be an actress for the rest of your life?"

"Well, that's hard to say, but it's definitely something I love to do. I've always been a performer... when I was a little girl, I was always in front of the mirror, holding a hairbrush in my hand and repeating comedy acts I had seen on TV."

"Oh... I can definitely see you doing that," Sarah said with a chuckle.

"Hey!" Joy said and tickled Sarah's hand.

"I meant that as a compliment."

"Oh, sure."

"Anyway... what's in your immediate future, Joy?"

"Well, my last show here is on the 29th. Then on the 30th, I'll drive to my flat in L.A. for a few days of R and R and then on June 5th and 6th, I'll be in Sacramento, doing two afternoon shows in a senior citizen center."

"As the Professor?"

"Oh, yes."

"Mmmm."

Sarah fell silent. She had always known that Joy wasn't working at the hotel on a permanent basis, but the realization that they'd soon be separated by most of the country still hit her hard. She started going through all kinds of permutations in her mind, but she couldn't come up with a solution that didn't require some sort of sacrifice by one of them.

'Get over it, Sarah. So this one wasn't for keeps. Big deal. You already knew she'd spell trouble. It's not like you haven't been here before. Cut your losses, file it under Experience and move on,' Sarah's inner voice said harshly. Sarah sighed again - there were times she wanted to choke that inner voice of hers.

Sarah started pulling her hand towards her, but Joy wouldn't let it go. When Sarah turned her head to look at Joy, she was greeted by a pair of green, sparkling eyes that held promises that Sarah knew couldn't be fulfilled.

"Which reminds me. I have two free tickets for you and Kimberly for tonight's seven-thirty show... if you're interested?" Joy said, but her voice seemed to come from a million miles away.

"Huh...? Oh... sure."

"Now I can't guarantee that you'll be called up to the stage again, but I do have another little thing that you might be interested in," Joy said and let go of Sarah's hand. She dug into her shorts pocket and found a small piece of paper that she handed to Sarah.

Sarah unfolded the paper and stared at the few words and the two signatures that were scribbled on it.

"This is a backstage pass? For me?"

"Yep. For you only. I hope Kimberly won't mind."

"Nah, she'll be fine. Thank you very much, Joy. I've... I've never been backstage to anything before," Sarah said with a sad chuckle.

"You're welcome. Once the show is over, come up to the stairs leading onto the stage itself. You remember those, right?"

"Sure."

"Well, if you wait there, I'll pick you up."

"Sounds great. Thanks."

Sarah looked at the backstage pass and suddenly found herself wishing that she and Joy hadn't hit off so well.

'Tomorrow is going to be a bitch of a day...' Sarah thought and got the shivers when the thought of leaving Joy behind entered her mind.

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Once the doors opened to the Prudence Memorial Theater, Sarah and Kimberly filed in, trying not to get elbowed too much by the large crowd. The audience seemed to be even larger than the one they had been in on their first day and the noise level in the foyer was massive.

A TruAmerica employee, wearing the trademark cloned plastic smile, was standing in the door to the auditorium itself, collecting the tickets from the crowd.

"Hello and welcome to the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort Variety Show. Your tickets, please," he said in a plastic monotone that had Sarah wondering if he was actually a human being or just some painted-up automaton.

When Sarah and Kimberly handed him their free tickets, he gave them a funny look and signaled a supervisor to come and help him out.

An imposing, stern-looking matron in her late forties came over to the door and took a thorough look at the free tickets. She put the tickets on a clipboard and checked the serial numbers against a list she had.

"Is there a problem, Ma'am?" Sarah asked as politely as she could.

"One moment, please."

"I see. Really helpful, thanks," Sarah grumbled, prompting getting poked in the ribs by Kimberly.

"They're on my list. You may enter," the stern matron said and gave the other TruAmerica employee the two tickets.

The man quickly doodled on them with a ball point pen and then handed the tickets back to Sarah and Kimberly.

"Row 9, seats 1 and 2."

"Thanks," Sarah growled and pushed Kimberly through the door and into the auditorium itself.

"What the hell was that all about?" Kimberly said when they had found the seats.

"Don't know and don't care. I just wanna enjoy the show. Do you mind taking the inner seat, like last time?"

"No problemo," Kimberly said and shuffled over to the second seat.

Sarah sat down and stretched out her legs into the aisle. She got herself comfortable and crossed her arms over her chest with a grunt.

When the lights began to dim, Sarah started thinking about the many fun things she and Joy had done together during the week and the kisses they had shared the night before. Once again, she found herself thinking that everything would've been so much easier if Joy had been a dull, bow-legged simpleton with missing teeth and a bad skin condition instead of the gorgeous creature she actually was.

Sarah sighed and shuffled around in her seat.

Once the lights were nearly out, the heavy curtains were pulled apart and a single spotlight was turned on. Joy entered the stage to rapturous applause, carrying the table with the Professor LaQuizzle marquee. Sarah noticed that Joy was still walking with a slight limp and she briefly wondered if it would impede her when she was supposed to run back and forth across the stage later in the act.

Joy put down the table at the center of the stage and adjusted her top hat so it was on crooked. She ran a gloved finger across her mustache, clicked her heels together and bowed to the audience.

For reasons she couldn't quite fathom, Sarah could feel tears stinging her eyes as she watched Joy go through the act. She simultaneously cursed and blessed Joy for stealing her heart so effortlessly and she suddenly wished she hadn't accepted the backstage pass.

"Abracadabra!" the Professor said, expecting a dove to fly out of the top hat. The audience loved Joy's reactions and cheered wildly when she clutched her head in shock over the fact that a rabbit appeared instead of a dove.

Kimberly whistled and cheered along with the rest of the spectators, but Sarah just sat there like an alabaster statue, watching the act unfold with an unreadable expression on her face.

After Joy had given the rabbit to a stagehand, she came back to the table and reached into the top hat.

"For my next trick... which I'm quite sure will be successful, as I've practiced it ever since I could walk," Joy said and held up the paper.

A thought suddenly flashed through Sarah's mind - what if Joy wanted to surprise her by magically picking her seat number again? Despite the fact that she'd be standing in front of all those people, Sarah wasn't sure she'd be able to maintain her cool, so she grabbed the armrests tightly, hoping and praying that Joy wouldn't pick her.

Several people laughed and Joy put her hands on her hips, pulling her patented look of outrage.

"Ahem! I shall require an assistant. Will the person in... row four, seat seventeen please come to the stage!"

As someone ahead of her cheered and punched the air, Sarah let out a long, slow sigh and slid a bit down in her seat. A bright spotlight was turned on, shining a cone of light down on the person in 4-17.

The audience started cheering and a young man wearing a mismatched sweatsuit and neon-green trainers got up from his seat a few rows in front of Sarah and Kimberly. As he walked towards the stage, he turned around and waved enthusiastically to the other spectators.

"Aw shit, that woulda been fun to go up there again, don't you think?" Kimberly said, whispering into Sarah's ear so she wouldn't disturb the performance.

"Well..." Sarah said with a shrug.

The young man had reached the stage and quickly ran up the stairs.

"Welcome, son. What's your name?" Joy said, greeting the young man with a handshake.

"Kyle."

"Hello, Kyle. I'm Professor Gemini LaQuizzle. I'm quite sure you've heard of me."

"Oh, yeah, man. I'm your biggest fan!" Kyle said, earning himself a loud cheer from the audience.

"Oh, really? How convenient, because you're to be my assistant for this next trick," Joy said, walking over to the table to pick up the foam brick. She turned to the audience and held up the brick.

"As you can see, this is a brick. A common, garden-variety brick, made of the finest clay in the country. Now observe, as my charming assistant here will shatter this brick against his forehead!"

The audience cheered and Kyle punched the air again.

"Yay!" he shouted.

"Perhaps it's something you do often?" Joy said, working off Kyle's slightly manic appearance.

A smattering of laughter rippled through the crowd, but, unfortunately, the joke didn't register with Kyle, so he just nodded and laughed along with the others.

Sarah watched with mixed emotions as the rest of the sketch unfolded: the young boy running onto the stage, Joy throwing the foam brick and Joy being chased by the matron with the rolling pin.

Once the chase scene was over, the Professor came back onto the stage and stood next to Kyle. Sarah smirked when she noticed that Joy was now limping far more than before - the running had clearly aggravated her injury. Still being the consummate professional, Joy tried to disguise her limp by having the Professor drag and wipe his foot on the floor and by saying "Damn dawg!" in a growly stage whisper.

The audience responded by clapping and Joy pulled her look of outrage. The audience cheered more and Kyle started laughing at Joy. Sarah narrowed her eyes down to blue slits and felt like going to up the stage and beat the stuffing out of him.

"For my final trick, I shall produce a very valuable item from my assistant's left ear!" Joy said and stretched out her arms in a fashion worthy of an Emmy nomination.

"Ah... HA!" Joy cried loudly and pulled out the gift certificate from Kyle's ear.

"How about that, Ladies and Gentlemen! A \$100 gift certificate, valid in any of the restaurants, bars and fitness activities in the Mall! Congratulations, Kyle!" Joy said and held up the paper for people to see.

The audience cheered wildly and some started whistling and Kyle jumped up and down in an obnoxious fashion. Just then, music started playing and Joy took Kyle's hand and raised it high in the air.

"Please give a big round of applause to my assistant, Kyle!"

As the curtains started to close behind them, Joy put her arm around Kyle's shoulder and pulled him off the side. Jaime, the photographer, was waiting for them and it didn't take more than a few seconds to snap a few pictures.

The audience clapped and cheered at Kyle as he descended the stairs and returned to his seat.

Up on the stage, Joy bowed and said, "And remember! Professor Gemini LaQuizzle, Magician Extraordinaire shall return!" She turned around and fumbled directly into the heavy curtains.

Sarah sighed deeply and covered her mouth with her hand. She looked at Joy who was still trying to find the gap in the curtains. Finally, Joy pretended to give up and limped off to stage-right.

A knot was beginning to form in Sarah's stomach and she wasn't looking forward to meeting Joy backstage once the show was over.

"Oh great, here comes the jugglers," Kimberly said, bringing Sarah back to the real world.

"Yeah... can't wait for the Eberhardts, or for Wilfred's choir, either," Sarah deadpanned, shuffling around in her seat.

"No shit. The highlight of the day," Kimberly added and looked at the odd, unreadable expression on Sarah's face. She put it aside, deciding to grill Sarah about it later.

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Once the choir had finished mangling The Star Spangled Banner, Dave Metcalfe, the stage manager, came out onto the stage, clapping loudly at the members of the choir.

"Ladies and gentlemen, that was the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel choir and orchestra, conducted by Wilfred F. Zane. Let's give them a big round of applause!"

The audience responded by applauding politely, but nowhere near as enthusiastically as they had done for Joy's performance.

"All the cast and crew of the TruAmerica Prudence Memorial Theater wish you a good evening and a safe journey home. See you soon!" the stage manager said and waved at the crowd - who were almost uniformly ignoring him.

The lights started to come back on and within moments, everybody shot up from their seats, eager to quickly get to the exits so they could get a good seat in whichever restaurant they were headed for.

Sarah and Kimberly had to move out of their seats to allow the rest of the people in their row to leave, but as soon as the crowd started to thin out, Sarah sat down again.

"What are you doing? Aren't you supposed to go up to the stage?"

"I don't know if I want to. I think I'm getting a headache."

Kimberly's eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Sarah, it's not often I lose my temper with you, but now I'm about to. What the hell are you sulking for? Huh?"

"Forget it."

"I ain't forgettin' nothin', 'cos I know what's wrong. You're just a six-foot chicken. Look, you like her and she likes you. Why can't you just go up there and have a great evening?"

"Oh, come on..."

"Am I right, or am I right? Boc, boc, boc... boc!"

"Kimmie... don't make me come over there and kick your ass."

"Boc, boc, boc..."

Suddenly someone whistled at Sarah and Kimberly and they looked up towards the stage. Joy was standing in full costume at the edge of the stage, waving her top hat at Sarah.

"Sarah... if you chicken out now, you'll never forgive yourself. Trust me," Kimberly said.

"I know," Sarah said with a sigh. She got up from her seat and waved at Joy, who was still standing on the stage.

"If you end up spending the night with her, remember that we have to check out at nine-thirty to catch the plane, so we probably need to get up at seven-thirty," Kimberly said.

"Spend the night? No. That won't happen. See you later, Kimmie."

"See ya... chicken."

Sarah waved at Joy again and began walking towards the actress. All along the aisle, she could hear Kimberly going 'boc, boc, boc' behind her back.

"Hi again, Sarah," Joy said and smoothed out her mustache.

"Hello, Professor. You were great today."

"Thank you. What a dimwit I picked out from the crowd, huh?" Joy said with a throaty laugh.

"Yeah. He coulda used a few more brain cells," Sarah said, keeping her hands in her pockets.

"Come. I want you to see my dressing room. You have the backstage pass, right? You need to show it to the security."

"Sure, I have it right here," Sarah said, finding the piece of paper.

"Good."

"You have a security team here? Is that really necessary?"

"Well, I didn't say security team. But we do have security. Come," Joy said and reached out for Sarah's hand.

Without actually wanting to, Sarah put out her hand. As soon as their fingers entwined, Sarah felt like she'd been kicked in the gut... or stabbed in the heart, she didn't really know which. All she knew was that simply holding the blonde actress' hand sent a wave of the warm fuzzies crashing over her and she couldn't stop a slight shiver from racing up and down her spine.

Joy led Sarah up the stairs and behind the curtain. They were immediately met by an elderly man in an ill-fitting uniform that looked like it had come from Rent-A-Costume. His hair and mustache were white, his eyes were watery and all in all, he wasn't particularly intimidating.

"Hello, Mr. Fuller. This is the friend I told you about," Joy said with a smile.

"Good evening, young lady. I need to see your pass, please."

"Here it is, Sir," Sarah said and handed the security guard the piece of paper. He held it an inch from his face, moving his lips as he studied the note.

"All right. You may enter," he said and handed the paper back to Sarah.

"Thank you, Sir."

Joy led Sarah away from the guard and turned right to go into the wings. They walked past a series of dressing rooms until they reached one that had a large picture of Professor LaQuizzle on the door.

"Huh? What's that for?" Sarah said, pointing at the picture.

"Well... remember I told you that I was the only one younger than fifty-five?"

"Yeah?"

"Turns out that it's more like I'm the only one younger than sixty-five. And I've discovered that some of the other artists can't remember which dressing room is theirs."

"Ohhh, you're kidding!"

Joy opened the door and clicked on the light. She held out her hand and Sarah walked past her and into the dressing room.

"I wish I were. After the five-thirty show last Tuesday, I walked in on June Eberhardt who had mistakenly taken my dressing room. She was preparing to go on and she was dressed in a sheer sarong... uhhh... she claims she's forty-nine. Well, I know first hand that she's gotta be a bit more than that. If you know what I mean," Joy said as she closed the door.

"Oh. Heh, heh. Yeah, well, it'll happen to all of us one day."

"Perhaps, but I've always thought that ballroom dancing would make you firmer," Joy said and found Sarah's hand again. She stepped very close to the taller woman and sent a look in Sarah's direction that didn't leave any room for misinterpretation.

"Joy... listen..." Sarah said, trying, and failing, to come up with something intelligent to say.

"What?" Joy purred.

The seductive tone in Joy's voice sent Sarah's mind into overdrive. Hundreds of conflicting emotions rushed through her head, but she couldn't decide on which ones to listen to - so she just ignored them all.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" Joy whispered, forcing Sarah to lick her suddenly bone dry lips.

"Uhhh... yeah."

"Well...?"

"We need to t... uhhh... I... could you remove your mustache first... please? I've never, ever kissed anyone who was wearing a mustache and I'm too old to start now," Sarah said, mentally kicking herself in the rear end for coming up with such a lame excuse for not kissing Joy.

Joy flashed a wide grin and reached up to rip off the mustache. It didn't take her more than three seconds and then they were back to square one.

"How about now?" Joy purred.

Sarah knew she had her back to the wall, metaphorically as well as literally, and she knew she couldn't put it off any longer. She leaned down and claimed Joy's lips in a kiss that was designed to be simple and chaste - but that soon turned anything but.

Sarah's hands started moving on their own accord again and she put one of them behind Joy's head, pulling the actress impossibly close. Just like in the club, their tongues went into a frenzied dance that sent a wave of pleasure through Sarah and she was powerless to stop a sensual moan from escaping her lips.

After a little while, they broke off the kiss and settled for looking deeply into each other's eyes.

"Oh, God, woman... you don't know what you're doing to me," Sarah croaked, panting.

"I could say the same thing, Sarah," Joy whispered. She traced the outline of Sarah's lips with her index finger, finishing by moving it down Sarah's jawline and onto her neck.

Sarah licked her lips again and cleared her throat. She suddenly realized that they would end up in bed if they didn't slow down and that was definitely a wake-up call. She took a step back to survey the dressing room.

"So, this is where you do your stuff, huh?"

Joy furrowed her brow, surprised by Sarah's sudden change of mood.

"Yes, it is. I go here to get dressed and to prepare for my performance."

"Oh, I thought you did that in your apartment?"

"I have all my spare costumes there. I'd never get here if I had to walk through the mall dressed as the Professor," Joy said with a laugh.

"True. I didn't think of that."

"I apply my makeup and stuff here. It's not too bad. I've seen worse," Joy said and looked around the 9x9 foot dressing room that was fitted with a large dresser with a mirror and a few drawers.

"Hmmm."

"Sarah, do you want to go back to my place and get a night cap... or something?" Joy said, sneaking her hand into one of Sarah's back pockets.

Sarah sighed inwardly, unsure of what to do. If she wasn't careful, this would end in tears - she chose the quick and easy way and slipped her mask into place.

"Uhhh... no, I'm sorry. I have to get up really early in the morning," Sarah said and turned around so Joy had to take her hand out of the pocket.

"Oh, come on. Just an iced tea...?"

"No, thank you."

Joy cocked her head and took a deep breath.

"I thought we had gone past that. What's wrong, Sarah?"

"I'm leaving in the morning."

"So? Why would that mean we can't have an iced tea tonight?"

"It wouldn't, but..."

"Great. That's a deal then. Give me two minutes to get changed and then we'll go back to my apartment."

"No, Joy, please listen..."

Joy put her fingers across Sarah's lips which was as effective as putting a cork in a bottle.

"No, you listen to me. There's nothing wrong with having a bit of fun. Sometimes you just have to take off your armor and... well, live a little, dammit."

"But you don't understand. That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

"Living?"

"No... taking off the armor. In twenty-four hours we'll be more than a thousand miles apart... and I don't want to get too... aw, hell. It's too late, anyway," Sarah said, slowly shaking her head.

"One iced tea and then we'll say good night. I promise."

"All right."

"All right?" Joy said, combining a winning smile with a nose crinkle.

"Yeah. All right," Sarah said, chuckling quietly. No matter what she did, she'd never be able to resist the Nose Crinkle.

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Joy unlocked the door to her apartment and pushed it open.

"Enter my humble abode," she said and stretched out her hand in a welcoming gesture.

"Thanks."

"Make yourself at home. I'll just grab a quick shower. It'll only be five minutes."

"OK. You don't need to rush. It's not even..." Sarah checked her watch. "... a quarter past nine yet."

"I won't," Joy said and first walked into the bedroom to pick out a fresh set of clothes and then into the bathroom to prepare the shower. As she was closing the bathroom door, she peeked around the corner and shot Sarah a blinding smile that left the taller woman lost for words.

Eight minutes later, Joy came out from the bathroom, freshly showered and looking even more radiant than usual even though she was only wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt. She waved at Sarah who was sitting in the comfy chair reading a magazine.

"What's that you're reading?" Joy said as she opened the door to the small refrigerator that doubled as the minibar.

"Last month's edition of 'Her'."

Sarah held up the cover of the magazine so Joy could see it, but the actress had buried herself deep inside the fridge.

"Do you prefer peach or classic?" Joy said.

"Classic, please," Sarah said and put away the magazine.

Joy took two plastic bottles of iced tea and closed the fridge door with her butt.

"Classic. Here ya go," she said, handing Sarah one of the bottles.

"Thanks."

Sarah immediately unscrewed the cap and took a long swig.

"I do have glasses, you know."

"Oh... I knew that."

Joy went over to the couch arrangement and put two glasses on the coffee table before sitting down in the center seat. She kicked off her slippers and folded up her legs underneath her.

"C'mon. Get over here," she said, patting the top of the backrest.

As she got up from the chair and shuffled towards the couch, Sarah took another swig off the plastic bottle.

'Perhaps I should fake choking on the iced tea...? Nah, that would look too suspicious,' Sarah thought.

Sarah put the bottle on the table and sat down on Joy's left. She casually turned her head to study Joy's features, but it didn't take her more than a few seconds to establish that Joy was looking so fine that it was impossible for her to look away - the actress had simply mesmerized her.

'Why, oh why couldn't we have met back home? Crap, this is my life in a nutshell. That's my future sitting right there, looking so damn fine my eyes hurt and I can't have her. Crap,' Sarah thought.

Feeling Sarah's eyes on her, Joy reached over to the table and poured Sarah's iced tea into one of the glasses. She took the glass and presented it to Sarah with a smile.

"Oh... thanks. Ya didn't have to do that," Sarah said, still gawking at Joy's profile.

"Sarah?"

"Yeah?"

"You're staring. It's not polite to stare."

'Busted!' Sarah thought and immediately looked away. She blushed furiously and tried to hide it by taking a long swig from the glass, but judging by the cheeky smirk Joy was sporting, she wasn't successful.

"Uhhh... sorry," Sarah said after a few seconds.

"No problem, but you know... I was thinking, why use your eyes when you could use your lips?" Joy said and leaned back in the seat. She took Sarah's free hand and started running her fingers slowly up and down Sarah's long digits, sometimes stopping to tickle the back of Sarah's hand.

Sarah took a deep breath and allowed the sweet sensations to take control over her again - until she saw another, very clear, vision of where this was headed.

"Uhhh... Joy?"

"Yeah?" Joy purred.

"Can... can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

"Can I borrow your bathroom? I gotta pee."

Joy furrowed her brow and stopped playing with Sarah's hand.

"Of course. You know where it is," she said, putting her hands in her lap.

"Thanks," Sarah said and jumped up from the couch. In two steps, she was at the bathroom door, closing it behind her in a hurry.

Sarah stared at herself in the mirror. She wanted to give herself a good slapping for acting like such a jerk to a nice girl like Joy, but at the same time, she knew that if she didn't leave now, they'd end up having sex... and if that happened, it would only make the separation worse.

Not that it was any better being in the bathroom - the room was still quite humid after Joy's shower and Sarah could clearly smell Joy's natural scent and the deodorant she was wearing. Sarah looked at the little shelf below the mirror and quickly spotted a small can of Hornet. She sighed and shook her head.

Sarah flushed the toilet to make it appear that she was done with whatever it was she was supposed to be doing and then opened the faucet to wash her hands and to splash some much needed cold water in her face.

'Sarah Madeleine Michaels... if this is how you treat someone who obviously thinks you're worth flirting with, you don't deserve better. Now go back to your crummy little flat and feel sorry for yourself for the rest of your life, you miserable git,' Sarah's inner voice said, ringing loud and clear through Sarah's mind.

Sarah sighed and wiped off her hands and her face on a towel hanging next to the wash basin. With a final look at herself in the mirror, she grunted and opened the door.

At the same time, Joy came out of the bedroom, carrying a small piece of paper and a notepad.

"I just remembered that I still had a few business cards left. It's got my email address on it," Joy said, handing the small piece of paper to Sarah.

"Joyrichla@westmail.net?" Sarah said quizzically.

"Yeah. Joy Richards was already taken so I had to get inventive. LA is for Los Angeles."

"Oh, right. Of course. Is this the one that's used when you get booked for a gig?" Sarah said, still looking at the card. Deep inside, she knew exactly how this would pan out - at first, they'd mail each other once a week, then once every two weeks, then once a month and then... nothing.

"No, they usually mail my agent. This one's my private... uhhh, line. What's your email address?" Joy said, flipping open the notepad. She picked up a pencil and prepared to write.

"Well, I have two. The one at work is smm@benco.com, but the mails sent there will be monitored by our IT-nerds, so... my private one is samami@zipconnex.com."

"Samami?"

"Yeah, that's... actually, Kimmie came up with that one. It's obviously the first two letters of each word in my name, but 'ami' is also friend in French. Kimmie thought that would be fun," Sarah said and sat down on the couch, relieved that the conversation had turned to a more innocent subject.

"She's right. That's a great email address," Joy said and closed the notepad. She looked at Sarah with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes that immediately made Sarah uncomfortable.

"Speaking of Kimmie... there's something I've been meaning to ask you... have you and Kimberly ever been romanti..." Joy continued.

"Good Lawrd, no!" Sarah said and laughed out loud.

"I guess that was funny?" Joy said with her hands on her hips.

"You have no idea. Kimmie and I are just not compatible. If she says '1', I'm sure to say '0'. We've always been like that, ever since kindergarten. And long may it last."

"She seems to be a very nice woman."

"Oh, she is. She's my best friend."

'And she's sure to give me the Third Degree the entire drive back to the airport tomorrow,' Sarah thought.

Joy went into the bedroom to put the notepad away. When she came back out, she was holding the rose Sarah had given her in the Torre Pendente. She ran the bud down the side of her neck and began to slither closer to Sarah.

"Hmmm," Joy purred and crouched down in front of Sarah so they were at eye level. Looking deeply into Sarah's eyes, Joy put her hands on Sarah's knees and gently pushed them closer, creating a perfect platform for her to climb up on.

Sarah gulped audibly, realizing that she'd been put in the spotlight and that it was too late to bolt. Her mouth turned bone dry in a matter of milliseconds and when she tried to lick her lips, her tongue nearly got stuck on the dry wastelands.

Joy climbed up and straddled Sarah's legs. She gradually slid down the long thighs, eventually coming to a rest against Sarah's torso. When their breasts touched through the fabric of their T-shirts, it sent a shockwave of electricity through Sarah and she could feel her nipples grow rigid at once.

Their lips were only inches apart and predictably, it didn't take long for them to engage in a heated kiss. Soon, Sarah's hands slid under the hem of Joy's T-shirt and climbed up the actress' toned back, probing, touching, exploring... wishing that it was her front instead.

Joy broke off the kiss and started putting small, loving pecks on Sarah's eyebrows and cheekbones.

"Sarah... it's not too soon now," she whispered.

It took Sarah a few moments to understand what Joy meant, and when she finally connected the dots, her heart started beating wildly. She took a few deep breaths, terribly unsure of what to do.

Joy climbed off Sarah's legs and ran her fingers seductively across Sarah's stomach. She winked and beckoned Sarah to follow her.

Sarah's heart and all her instincts screamed at her to follow Joy into the bedroom, but her fear won out. Her heart was beating so hard she could hardly hear anything over the rush of blood in her ears, but she knew she had to escape... and it had to be now.

"Well. Thanks for the iced tea and the free tickets. And the backstage pass and... and for making my week so enjoyable," Sarah said in a trembling voice as she got up from the couch. She ran a shaking hand through her hair, feeling sicker than she ever had.

"Hey, haven't you been paying attention...?" Joy purred.

"I guess this is g-goodbye, then."

The words hung in the air between them, acting like a bucket of ice cold water and creating a barrier that nothing could penetrate.

Joy's face fell and she looked down. She sighed.

"Right. Goodbye, Sarah," she said quietly.

Nothing more needed to be said, so Sarah turned around and walked over to the door to the hallway. She put her hand on the doorknob, but didn't open it. Her heart thumped painfully in her chest, but she finally twisted the doorknob.

Sarah cast a brief glance back at Joy who was still standing in the middle of the apartment, holding the red rose. Joy's face read like an open book, showing the many emotions running through her; disappointment, sadness, pain and even a touch of anger among them.

Sarah stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. A few tears escaped her eyes but she did nothing to stop them.

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DAY 8 - SATURDAY, MAY 15th

"Hey, hon. I'm all set. My apartment is cleaner than it was when we arrived," Kimberly said as she stepped into Sarah's apartment.

To Kimberly's surprise, Sarah spun around on her heel and disappeared into the bedroom without even saying good morning. With an astounded expression on her face, Kimberly put her suitcases on the floor and closed the door to the hallway. Suddenly she noticed that Sarah's apartment was still a mess and she stopped to scratch her hair.

"Uhhh... Sarah, do you need a hand?"

"No, I got it," Sarah said from somewhere inside the bedroom.

"All right. Anyway, I can't believe I've packed my stuff quicker than you. I don't think that's ever happened before. Remember that time at the summer camp back in '89 where you had packed everything the night before we went home? The camp commandant gave you a real dressing down for sleeping in your street clothes," Kimberly said and laughed.

"Look, Kimmie... less talking, OK? Please?" Sarah said, standing in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Sure. Man, you really look like death warmed over today. You should take better care of yourself... how much sleep did you get last night?"

Sarah turned around without making a comment and went back to work, trying to get her clothes stuffed into her travel bag. With a shrug, Kimberly followed Sarah into the bedroom.

"Come on, let me help you with that," Kimberly said and took the travel bag. Sarah growled and yanked the bag back out of Kimberly's hands.

"I told ya I got it," Sarah said angrily, stuffing the white denim shirt into the bag with such force that Kimberly was surprised it didn't lose a sleeve.

"All right, all right... Jeez! I'm just trying to help!"

"I'll let you know when I need your help."

"Gawd, you're charming today, you know that?" Kimberly said and put her hands on her hips.

Sarah looked up and stared at the curly-haired woman. After a few seconds, she exhaled and shook her head.

"I'm sorry for being such a bitch."

"It's all right. What the hell happened last night?"

Sarah sighed and rubbed her eyes.

"That's a long, grotesque and just plain horrible story. I'll tell you in the car... when we're a million miles away from this place. That's it, all done," Sarah said, working the zipper on the travel bag.

"Sarah?"

"Yeah?"

"You forgot something."

"What?"

"The drawer with all your underwear," Kimberly said, pointing at the bottom drawer in the dresser which was still chock full of clothes.

"Oh, crap."

"I'll help ya. I'll go get a plastic bag for your panties and stuff."

"Thanks, Kimmie."

"That's what friends are for, buddy," Kimberly said and patted Sarah on the shoulder.

"Mmmmm... all clear. We're done," Kimberly said after a thorough check of Sarah's apartment.

"Good," Sarah said, sitting in the couch. She looked absolutely miserable, with ashen skin and black circles under her dull, bloodshot eyes.

"You haven't slept a wink, have you?"

"Sleep?"

"Uh-huh. That's what I thought. Are you sure you can drive?"

"Yeah. No problem," Sarah said and got up from the couch.

"Sarah... what the hell happened between you and Joy?" Kimberly said, stopping Sarah by putting a hand on the taller woman's arm.

"I'll tell you later. What time is it?"

"Quarter to nine."

"OK, how about closing up here, take the bags down to the car and stow 'em and then take a final stroll through the mall? You know, to see the sights one last time?"

"Well... sure. If you're up to it?"

"I wouldn't have asked you if I wasn't."

"Okie-dokie. Lead on, hon."

The morning air was surprisingly chilly and Sarah got goosebumps on her arms as she pushed the enormous baggage trolley along the sidewalk lining the parking lot. Kimberly only carried the plastic bag with the surplus underwear and she was whistling loudly to herself.

"Kimmie, do you have to whistle like that?" Sarah said with a sigh.

"Yep."

"Please stop."

"Boy, you really are grumpy today," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"Oh, this is nothing... if you keep it up, I'll show you grumpy."

"Ooooooh, tough gal."

Sarah drove the trolley down a slope and turned onto the lane where the white BMW was parked. She dug into her jeans pocket to find the remote for the car and pressed the small button. The car responded by blinking its hazard lights twice and unlocking the doors.

"Kimmie, hold the trolley while I unload it. The ground is uneven and there's no point in scratching the car."

"Good thinking, hon," Kimberly said and took hold of the trolley's handlebar.

Sarah effortlessly picked up the two suitcases and her travel bag and stored them in the trunk.

"I wish I had your strength, Sarah. You always makes it look so easy."

'Strength? I'm the biggest coward to ever walk the Earth,' Sarah thought.

"Yeah, well. I have to be good for something, right?" Sarah said and dusted off her hands.

"I'll just go and deposit the trolley and then we'll meet at the entrance to the Mall, OK?" Kimberly said with a grin.

"Sure. Three minutes. I'm just gonna clean the windows and stuff."

Kimberly gave Sarah a thumbsup and whistled loudly as she pushed the trolley back towards the high-rise.

Sarah bent down and reached into the trunk to get a kitchen roll and a bottle of GlassFriend. As she began to clean the windows, she couldn't stop looking up at the high-rise. She quickly found the eleventh floor and began counting the windows until she found Joy's apartment.

After looking at the windows for a few seconds, Sarah sighed and turned back to the car. Suddenly her sixth sense kicked in and she spun around - she stared intently at the apartment and for a split second, she thought she could see a figure standing in the window.

The sun broke free of the clouds and created a reflection in the high-rise that forced Sarah to shield her eyes. By the time the sun had hid behind the next cloud, the figure was gone.

Sarah sighed and went to work on the BMW's windshield.

A few minutes later, Sarah and Kimberly walked through the sliding doors and entered the mall. Kimberly hooked her arm inside Sarah's and flashed a cheeky smile as they began walking down the central path.

"I hope you've enjoyed your birthday present."

"Oh... I have, thank you. It's been... very special. An unforgettable experience."

"You know, I think this would be a really good spot to celebrate me and Ellen's fifth anniversary next year. I think she'll love it."

"I'm sure she would."

"Yeah, even though we're nowhere near as athletic as you are, Miss Dynamite, there's plenty of bars and restaurants for us to enjoy."

"Mmmm."

"And the theater and Club Feelgood, of course. Hey, did you and Joy have any problems the other night? I mean, were you bothered by anyone when you and Joy were dancing close and kissing and stuff...?" Kimberly said, emphasizing the last few words to coax a reaction out of Sarah.

"Mmmm."

"You were?" Kimberly said and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Huh? Oh... sorry, I zoned out."

"I'll say. So you weren't bothered?"

"No, no. Everything was cool."

"Do you even know which day it is?"

"Oh, ha, ha. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee at the Sausage King," Sarah said and hoisted up in Kimberly's arm.

"... and maybe a pancake to go?"

"I thought you wanted to lose some weight?"

"That was last week."

"I'm going to have to go through a withdrawal program... man, what am I gonna do now I don't have regular access to these fab pancakes?" Kimberly said, munching loudly on two pancakes wrapped in a napkin.

"Make your own?"

"Nuh-uh, they're never the same. My cooking skills are limited."

They continued strolling down the central path until they reached the sliding doors at the far end of the mall. The fitness section hadn't opened yet, so they were the only ones there. Sarah walked over to the closed Powerboxing hall and pressed her nose against the closed doors. She put up her hands to block out the light and took a final peek at the only thing she didn't get to try out.

"Maybe next time, huh?" Kimberly said, putting her arm around Sarah's shoulder.

"Yeah. Well, whatever. We got our money's worth with the aerobics, right?"

"Ughh, don't remind me. My knees are still aching from that high-impact class the other day. Not to mention that dancero-bics nonsense last Sunday. You know, I can still feel it in my abdominal muscles," Kimberly said and patted her belly.

"Mmmm."

"Hey, that's a good cue, actually. Did you ever get a first hand impression of Joy's fab set of abs?"

"Oh, look at the time. We better get back, Kimmie. We don't wanna be late for the plane," Sarah said and walked away - leaving Kimberly shaking her head in frustration.

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"Good, there's no queue," Kimberly said as they entered the high-rise and went up to the reception desk. The closer they got to the desk, the more Sarah slowed down and soon she was only walking at a snail's pace.

"Uhhh... Kimmie, I think I... uhhh... forgot... uhhhh. There's something I need to do before we check out," Sarah said, fidgeting severely with her keycard.

"Oh?" Kimberly said and looked at her watch.

"It won't take long, I just need to..."

"I get it. Go on. You have fifteen minutes."

"Thanks. Would you mind holding my card?"

"Nope."

After handing Kimberly the keycard, Sarah made a beeline for the Turbolift to save as much time as possible. She only needed to wait for a few seconds before it arrived and she rushed inside and pressed '11' as soon as the doors opened.

The Turbolift sent her skyward at a terrifying pace and just like the first time she had used it, she was dizzy once she got off.

She shook off the dizziness and quickly opened the frosted door to the hallway. She walked briskly towards #1118 and raised her hand to knock on the door. An inch before her knuckles made contact, she froze and closed her eyes.

'Get real, stupid. If you were Joy, would you open the door after being treated that way last night? Of course you wouldn't,' Sarah's inner voice said.

Sarah sighed... but knocked.

No reply.

She knocked a little harder, but there were still no signs of activity coming from the inside.

"Joy? Joy, it's me. I just want to... to say that I'm really sorr... I just wanted to say goodbye in a proper way."

After waiting nearly two minutes, Sarah went down to #1119 and repeated the procedure - with identical results.

She took a deep breath and then let out a long, slow sigh. She ran a hand through her hair and started walking back to the Turbolift.

"You shouldn't have left," Kimberly said as soon as Sarah stepped out of the elevator.

"Why not?"

"Because not thirty seconds after you had gone, Joy came down on the Scenic Elevator."

Sarah's eyebrows twitched and she closed her eyes and groaned.

"Did... did she say anything?"

"She was her usual polite self. She said 'goodbye' and 'have a nice trip' and that was it, basically."

"She didn't say anything about me?"

"No. She didn't even mention your name. Sarah, what the..."

"Which way did she go?" Sarah said and started walking towards the sliding doors. Kimberly turned around, grabbed Sarah's arm and held on tight.

"That's not a good idea, Sarah. What the hell did you guys do last night?"

"We didn't do anything. Anything at all... No, you're right. It's not a good idea to follow her. Let's get this behind us. Where's my card?" Sarah said, pinching the bridge of her nose hard.

"Got it right here. I'll do the talking. You're too messed up," Kimberly said and walked over to the TruAmerica employee sitting behind the reception desk.

"You have no idea," Sarah whispered to herself.

"Good morning, I'm Rita. How may I help you?" the woman behind the desk said.

"Good morning, Rita. We're checking out. Rooms 811 and 812. Miss Lloyd-Warren and Miss Michaels."

"I need your keycards, please," Rita said, wearing the patented TruAmerica plastic smile.

As soon as Kimberly put the two keycards on the counter, Rita snapped them up and inserted them one at a time into a slot in a small machine on the desk. Two pieces of paper were printed out and Rita put them on the counter for Kimberly and Sarah to sign.

"Sign on the dotted line, please. Both of you," Rita said, smiling her fake smile in Sarah's direction.

Sarah went up to the counter and signed the papers, answering the receptionist's plastic smile with one of her own.

"I didn't even use the minibar," Kimberly said with a grin as she was signing the paper.

Rita checked the signatures and then tore the top cover off both papers. She put the originals down on her counter and handed Sarah and Kimberly their copy.

"Here you go."

"Thank you," Kimberly said and put the copy into her wallet.

"The TruAmerica Corporation hopes you've had a pleasant stay. If you liked our service, please tell your friends and family," Rita said in a monotone, once again reminding Sarah of a robot.

"Actu..."

"The TruAmerica Corporation would also like to wish you a safe and relaxing journey home."

"Tha..."

"Please don't drink and drive and please use your seatbelts. Many fatalities could have been avoided by using seatbelts."

"I'm..."

"Also, please respect our state's speed limit. If you see a driver behaving aggressively or erratically, please inform the Sheriff's department. Please remember to pull over before you use your cell phone."

"I alw..."

"We can only make the roads safe if we all co-operate. Thank you," Rita said with a beaming smile.

Stunned, Sarah waited a few seconds to see if Rita would continue the diatribe, but it soon became apparent that she was done.

"Thanks," Sarah said, unsure if she should laugh or cry over the receptionist's speech.

"C'mon, hon. Let's go home," Kimberly said, hooking her arm inside Sarah's.

Sarah started the BMW and reversed out of the parking space. She put it in Drive and crept out of the parking lot, remembering to respect the 10 mph speed limit. Once they reached the bar blocking the road, Sarah leaned out of the window and pressed the button.

When the bar rose, Sarah stepped on the gas, leaving the TruAmerica Prudence Hotel, Sports & Fitness Resort and all it represented behind her.

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An hour later, Kimberly rubbed her hands on her bare arms, wishing like crazy that she had brought a jacket.

"Sarah, hon, would ya mind turning down the air conditioning? It's freezing in here."

"I'm hot as hell."

"That's because you didn't get any sleep last night. I think we have a touch of ground frost on the dashboard. And look," Kimberly said and exhaled.

"See?" she said, pointing at the non-existent vapor from her breath.

Sarah grunted, but turned the air conditioning down two notches.

"Let's have some music, I'm falling asleep," Kimberly said and turned on the radio.

"Uggh, not today... please," Sarah said and rubbed her forehead.

"Just the news and traffic report, then?"

"Well... OK," Sarah said with a sigh.

Fifteen minutes later, Kimberly couldn't take the uncomfortable silence anymore and she turned in her seat to face Sarah.

"Sarah Michaels, it's time to fess up. I'm your best friend and I expect... hell, I demand to know what on Earth went on last night between you and Joy."

Sarah grunted, but kept quiet.

"Please don't stonewall me, Sarah."

Tears began to sting Sarah's eyes and suddenly, a single drop escaped her eye and trickled down her cheek. She hurriedly wiped it away with her hand, praying that Kimberly hadn't noticed.

"What the hell... are you crying? OK, this isn't funny anymore. Please tell me what the flying flip went on last night," Kimberly said, putting her hand on Sarah's shoulder.

'Damn... she noticed,' Sarah thought. "Oh, it was..."

"I need to know whose ass I should kick. Yours or Joy's?"

Sarah turned her head and looked into Kimberly's eyes. Several seconds passed by and then Sarah sighed and looked back at the road.

"Definitely mine," she said quietly.

"Sarah, Sarah, Sarah... what happened? Did you find out she's really a guy? Or that she's into whips and latex and stuff?"

"Oh, Jeez, Kimmie!"

"Because if she is, I might consider giving her a ca... never mind. Well... I have a well-developed imagination and I can easily come up with inanities from now until New Year's Eve, but it would save us both a lot of time if you just told me what happened."

"I chickened out."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Crap, Sarah... that's nothing. It's gotta be more than that. You didn't sleep at all and Joy didn't even mention you this morning, despite all the time the two of you have spent together this week. There's gotta be more to it than that."

"It was... it was probably more the way I did it."

"Oh?"

"It was... nasty."

Sarah pushed down on the gas pedal and swept past an eighteen-wheeler. Once she was clear of it, she slowed down and went back into the right lane.

"I don't understand myself sometimes, Kimmie. I just don't understand what the hell it is that's going on inside my head. I mean, I'm pretty regular, right?"

"Well, sure. You have a couple of quirks and idiosyncrasies, but we all do."

"Yeah, and all in all, in my own not-so-humble opinion, I'm no freak or psycho. And yet, I behave like one whenever... whenever someone like Joy is trying to reach out to me," Sarah said and thumped her hand down on the rim of the steering wheel.

"Well, I..."

"You shoulda seen her last night, Kimmie. I mean, Jeez... I'm talking sex on legs. I was sitting on the couch and she was straddling me..."

"Ooooh, go on," Kimberly said and poked Sarah in the side.

"... and we kissed again. Gawd, how we kissed. And the further we went, the more frightened I became. By the end of the... uhhh... first inning, if you know what I mean, I was petrified."

"Oh, Sarah..."

"Then Joy climbed off me and... uhhh... made her intentions clear."

"Sex?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Let me guess. You bolted?"

"I bolted. I jumped up from the couch like the devil was on my tail, told her goodnight in the most impolite way you can imagine and then ran away like a fucking coward."

"And you haven't stopped running yet."

Sarah turned her head to look at Kimberly.

"No, I guess I haven't," Sarah said quietly.

"Sarah, that was a crappy thing to do."

"I know."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"If I had met Joy this morning, I would've apologized... I think. But now... I'm gonna keep running," Sarah said and prepared to overtake another truck.

"The hell you are. Listen to me, you big chickenshit... a woman like Joy only comes around once a lifetime and I'll be goddamned if I'm gonna sit idly by while you waste your life running away from someone who so obviously likes you!"

"Man, Kimmie, what was in those pancakes? Damn, girl!"

"Rusty nails, baby. Look, you know damn well that a woman can only handle a certain amount of bullshit before she walks away for good, and you're getting awfully close to that limit with Joy."

"I know."

"Sarah, for Chrissakes, can't you see that you're treating her the same way *you've* been treated by all those airhead dates you've had over the years?"

"Goddammit, Kimmie, I know. But there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

"Well, duh... of course there is," Kimberly said and crossed her arms over her chest. She looked at Sarah, waiting for the penny to drop.

Sarah sighed and put her elbow on the windowsill. She pulled out into the fast lane and overtook three trucks running in a convoy. As they went past the lead truck, the driver gave them a long salute with the airhorns and Sarah wished she could trade places with the truckdriver.

"I have to go back and apologize to Joy," Sarah said quietly.

"That's probably a good idea, hon. Actually, I think you should go down on your hands and knees and beg for forgiveness. If you don't at least try to get this mess sorted out, you'll regret it for a very long time," Kimberly said and put her hand on Sarah's thigh.

Sarah nodded solemnly.

"I regretted it as soon as I left her apartment. But by then... it was too late."

"Well, maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. You'll only know when you're face to face with her. If she goes all ginzu on you, it was too late," Kimberly said and stuck out her tongue.

"Oh, well, that would certainly complicate things. But if it comes to that, I guess I had it coming. Sliced and diced," Sarah said with a sad chuckle.

"Sarah?"

"Yeah? More sage advice?"

"Not exactly. According to the GPS, there's a truckstop coming up in two miles or so. Would you mind stopping? I gotta pee," Kimberly said and shuffled around in her seat.

"Again? When will you learn to go before we take off?"

"The restrooms are clean if you need to go," Kimberly said as she walked back to the white BMW, drying her hands on a large wad of toiletpaper. They had parked on a gravelly lot on the outskirts of the truckstop so they wouldn't be bothered by anyone.

"Nah, I'm good," Sarah said, leaning against the car.

"I hope you're serious about going back."

"I am. Of course, that means you have to carry your luggage yourself."

"I'll get a skycap. What about your plane ticket?"

"Won't be a problem. I'll get it rebooked."

Sarah turned around and put her hand on the doorhandle. Before she opened the door, she looked at the road that led back to the hotel.

"We're still thirty miles away from the airport and then I have 102 miles back again... hmmm... it's a quarter past eleven now... that'll make it almost half past one give or take. Plus the time at the airport. That makes it two o'clock. Shit, that doesn't leave me much time before Joy's off for the three-thirty show," Sarah said and thumped one fist into the other.

"Sarah, please think about yourself, too. You didn't sleep last night, remember. You look like shit now... you're gonna look positively awful before you get back."

"I only have myself to thank for that, Kimmie."

"I know, but..."

Sarah held a hand over her stomach - she could feel a knot of trepidation beginning to form and she already dreaded the return trip.

"Come on, let me drive the rest of the way to the airport. I've checked you out and I think I know which knobs and dials are which now," Kimberly said and walked around the front of the BMW.

"Seriously?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Well, it's all yours, then. The funny stick on the floor is the gear lever."

"Oh, ha flippin' ha. I do have a license," Kimberly said and got in.

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A good forty-fives minutes later, Kimberly pulled up to the curb in front of the airport terminal and switched off the engine.

"This is only a drop-off zone, so we can't park here for more than five minutes," Kimberly said.

"It won't take us longer than that."

"Nah. So, I guess this is it... for now," Kimberly said and turned around in her seat to face Sarah.

"I guess."

"Well, all in all, I've had a great holiday and despite everything that has happened, I hope you've had fun, too."

"Mostly. But anyway, I've loved your company, Kimmie."

"Gawd, that's gotta be the sleep deprivation talkin'."

"Hell, no. You're my best friend. Look at what we did together... we ate Brats, we got drunk..."

"You got drunk. I only had two Cuba Libres, remember."

"Whatever. We went to a variety show, we did the aerobics classes... I had fun doing all those things."

"Ughh, you had to mention the aerobics..."

Sarah laughed out loud and punched Kimberly on the shoulder.

"The next holiday is on me, OK?" Sarah said.

"Really? I'd like to... uhhh... go on a Caribbean cruise, no, no, a Mediterranean cruise."

"No problem."

"Huh? Just like that? Damn, I shoulda said New Zealand."

"Can you get through the security checks without attracting attention to yourself?" Sarah said and quickly pulled back in case Kimberly would hit out at her.

"Oh, yeah, no problem. I didn't steal any towels from the hotel or anything. Not even a bar of soap."

"Well, that's good to hear," Sarah said and laughed again.

With a chuckle, Kimberly reached down and pulled the small lever that opened the trunk. They both stepped out of the car and went around the back.

"C'mon, let me get those," Sarah said and pulled out Kimberly's two suitcases.

"And there's a skycap," Kimberly said and whistled loudly at a man pushing a luggage trolley.

As soon as the suitcases were loaded onto the trolley, Kimberly turned around to face Sarah. She reached out and grabbed the taller woman in a bear hug that sent all the air rushing out of Sarah.

"Gawd, I really hope it'll work out between you, hon. I really, really do," Kimberly said and put her hands on Sarah's arms.

"Thanks, Kimmie."

"How long are you planning on staying?"

"I... don't know. If everything works out, then probably a few days. Joy has another couple of weeks on her contract at the Prudence Hotel. And if things don't work out, well..." Sarah said with a shrug.

"Well, in any case, keep me posted, OK?"

"Of course."

"Maybe I'll hear about you in the news... 'Woman Reduced To Pizza Toppings After Nasty Ginzu Accident. More at eleven.' "

"Well, if that's my destiny, I'm leaving you my entire B-movie collection."

"Oh, gee. Thanks, babe. No, seriously..." Kimberly stepped back, suddenly at a loss for words.

"I know. And I will," Sarah said and returned the crushing bear hug from before.

"Uhhh! Short person in distress!" Kimberly said, buried deep underneath Sarah's strong torso and arms.

Sarah let go of Kimmie and took a step back.

"See ya, Kimmie," Sarah said and walked around the rear of the BMW.

"See ya, big gal," Kimberly said with a wave. Sarah returned the wave and then got into the car.

As Sarah drove off, Kimberly shook her head and exhaled slowly.

"Man, if this doesn't work out, Sarah is gonna fall to pieces," she said quietly to herself.

Sarah drove over to the car rental company to renew the contract on the BMW. After a little sweet talking and a lot of paperwork and waving of credit cards, Sarah was able to keep the same car and she soon drove out of the airport and turned back onto the Interstate. The quick and efficient car soon got up to speed and started eating up the miles that lay between her and the Prudence hotel.

When Sarah reached the truck stop she and Kimberly had rested at before, she decided that it was a good time to take a break, so she turned off the Interstate and went up the offramp. As she was waiting to turn into the truck stop, she could see that the gravelly parking lot had been occupied by three semis, so instead of going there, she drove between all the eighteen-wheelers to get to the central parking lot.

Once she found an available slot, she reversed the BMW into it and turned off the engine. To get a bit more comfortable, she moved the seat back as far as it would go and lowered the backrest a couple of notches.

Sarah let out a slow sigh and leaned back in the seat. Her stomach was rebelling against her and she put her hands on it to try to get it to calm down. The butterflies had made a comeback and they were flapping their wings harder than ever.

After a few minutes, Sarah decided that she needed something to drink, so she left the car and started walking towards the restaurant of the truck stop.

The restaurant was an anthill of activity with dozens of waitresses zooming back and forth between the kitchen and the tables, all carrying huge plates with greasy meals that completely ruined Sarah's appetite.

She quickly spotted a refrigerated soft drink vending machine in the far corner of the restaurant and shuffled over there to check out what they were offering.

The brands were all foreign to her, but when her eyes landed on a sodapop called 'Xtra-Caff Cola', she chuckled and dug into her pocket to find the \$1.50 needed to buy it.

'I hope that's an apt name... I really need a kick up the backside,' Sarah thought and put the coins into the slot. She pressed the button next to the Xtra-Caff can and waited patiently for the vending machine to process her order. It didn't take long and she was soon able to retrieve the can from the narrow shelf at the bottom of the machine.

As she turned around, she noticed a sign hanging on the wall behind the counter - "Uncle Louie's Truck Stop - The Original Choke'n'Puke Joint."

Underneath it, an overweight man in his late fifties, no doubt Uncle Louie himself, was sitting on a bar stool next to the cash registers, generally looking gruff and unpleasant, and busy chewing on something that had once been a cigar. He had greasy hair, a three-day stubble and he was wearing a horrendously filthy undershirt - Sarah grimaced and quickly left the restaurant.

On her way back to the BMW, she cracked open the can and took several long swigs. She didn't particularly enjoy the taste, but it was as laced with caffeine as the label promised it would be, and Sarah definitely needed that.

She opened the driver's side door and reached in to put the can into one of the cupholders - when she had done that, she put her hands behind her head and stretched her back, resulting in all sorts of cracking and popping sounds from her spine. With a sigh, she got in and closed the door.

Once she had taken another long swig from the can, she moved the rear view mirror down so she could see herself.

"Wow, Kimberly wasn't kidding. I really do look like death warmed over," Sarah said out loud.

"... Or someone who's on the fourth day of a three day bender," she added under her breath before taking another swig of the Xtra-Caff Cola.

She looked at herself again and tried to imagine what the reunion with Joy would be like. As soon as she started thinking about it, her stomach protested wildly by contracting itself into a knot.

"Hi, Joy... I'm back. Oh, Gawd, what are you doing? Please put down that machete! Swoosh, swoosh, chop, splat, thump," Sarah said, chuckling out loud at her silliness. She emptied the can of cola and put it back into the cupholder.

"Hi, Joy. I'm sorry 'bout last night. I was a dickhead and I know it. I'd like to make it up to you somehow... Oh, Jeez, that's pathetic," Sarah said and shook her head angrily.

"Hi, Joy... yeah, I'm back. Please forgive me. Please give me a second... third... fourth chance. Crap."

Sarah covered her eyes with her hand and took a few deep breaths. She looked at herself in the rear view mirror and knew she had to be far more sincere if she was to stand any chance at all of convincing Joy to listen to her.

"Joy. I treated you very badly last night and I've regretted it ever since I left you. I know you have every right to throw me out on my ass, but please listen to me before you do. Please accept my sincere apology. I know I acted immaturity, but I was just..." Sarah's voice trailed off and she sighed again.

"Just so scared of you. Pathetic. I need to get my stupid melon checked," she added quietly.

She took the cool can and rolled it across her forehead several times. The lack of sleep had given her a slight fever and the knot in her stomach made her feel uncomfortable.

"Oh, well. Why walk to the scaffold when you can drive," Sarah said and moved the seat forward until it was in the correct position. She adjusted the backrest and the mirror and then turned the ignition key.

**_*_

When Sarah pulled up to the bar blocking the entrance to the parking lot, she got a major case of déjà vu that sent her stomach into a series of backflips. With a sigh, she rolled down the window and reached out to press the button marked 'visitors'.

The bar rose and she drove slowly into the lot. She had to do two complete tours to find somewhere to park and in the end, she had to settle for a space in the very last row of the parking lot.

Before she dared to go anywhere, she had to spend a few moments convincing her angry stomach to settle down. With a groan, she got out of the car, locked it and then began the long trek to the entrance of the high-rise.

Sarah immediately recognized the TruAmerica employee working behind the reception desk in the lobby - it was Cheryl, the same woman who had greeted her and Kimberly a week ago. The last thing Sarah wanted was to get into an argument with a TruAmerica employee, so she walked as inauspiciously as she could around the edge of the lobby.

Once she reached the Turbolift, she pressed the button and took a step back to wait for it. Even though Sarah had every right to be there, she felt very awkward and even a bit like a trespasser, so when the elevator didn't arrive at once, she started looking over her shoulder at the reception desk to check if she had been spotted yet.

When the Turbolift finally arrived, Sarah hurriedly stepped inside and pressed '11' on the small panel.

Less than twenty seconds later, the elevator came to a halt on the 11th floor and Sarah stepped out and started walking towards the frosted door that would lead her to Joy's hallway.

The last few steps were the hardest for Sarah - she had a hurricane of emotions raging inside her head and her heart and her stomach had tied itself into a rock-hard knot. She felt dizzy and even a bit lightheaded, but she forced her legs to walk towards the door to Joy's apartment.

With her heart beating so hard that the rush of blood drowned out everything else, she raised her hand and knocked on the door.

"Joy, it's me! Are you in there? I've come to a-apologize..."

No reply.

"If you're in there, please open the door!"

Sarah tried knocking again, but still nothing happened. She briefly considered trying apartment #1119 as well, but the emotional strain had drained her of her last energy and she had to put out her hand and lean against the wall. With a pained groan, she slid down the wall, ending up sitting on the carpet. She pulled up her legs and rested her arms on her knees.

With a heartfelt sigh, she plonked her forehead down on her arms, wishing that the ground would just open up and swallow her whole.

A few minutes later, Sarah could hear the door at the far end of the hallway open, but she didn't have enough energy left to bother lifting her head to see who it was.

"Sarah...?"

The unmistakable sound of Joy's golden voice spurred Sarah on and she looked up to see Joy standing in the middle of the hallway holding a pile of clean laundry. She was wearing a pair of khaki chinos and a dark red Route 66 T-shirt, and Sarah thought she had never looked better.

"Joy..."

"You're back. Did something happen? Did the car break down?" Joy said, her voice holding just the faintest hint of warmth and friendliness.

Sarah couldn't remember any of the things she had prepared back at the truck stop and she was too tired to come up with any flowery prose, so she just cleared her throat and spoke her mind.

"No, I... I dropped Kimmie off at the airport and then I came back. I wanted to apo... I mean, I couldn't leave... I just couldn't leave you."

A few seconds passed by without any reaction from Joy, but then she put down the laundry on the carpet and took a defensive stance.

"You must think I'm pretty goddamned gullible," she said in a tone of voice that jarred Sarah's soul with its harshness.

"I'm s-sorry for last night."

"You damn well should be. I was ready to share my bed with you... I wanted to make love with you and that's **not** something I'm offering to every leggy brunette who happens to cross my path. And what did you do? You slapped me across the face and ran away. You really hurt me, Sarah."

"I'm sorry. I won't run away again."

"That's the third time you've told me that. And twice you've taken off."

"I'm done running."

Suddenly a door to an apartment opened and a family of four entered the hallway. As they walked past Sarah and Joy, a little boy tugged at his father's sleeve.

"Daddy, why is that lady sitting on the floor?"

"I don't know, Junior. Maybe she's tired?" the man said and opened the frosted glass door at the end of the hallway.

"Maybe she's just an asshole..." Sarah said quietly once she and Joy had the hallway to themselves.

Joy sighed deeply and put her hands on her hips. She shook her head repeatedly, almost like she didn't know what to do with Sarah.

"Let's talk inside," Joy said and unlocked the door to her apartment. She picked up the pile of laundry and stepped inside, leaving Sarah to get up by herself.

Joy threw her keycard in the basket next to the TV and went into the bedroom to unload the pile of laundry. She was soon back in the living room, standing with her legs slightly apart and her arms folded across her chest. Her face was passive, telling Sarah to make the first move.

Even though Sarah's brain felt like a bowl of jello, she could easily read Joy's body language - the actress was upset, disappointed and even angry and it scared Sarah almost as badly as when Joy had been playing the sexpot the night before, although for almost exactly opposite reasons.

Sarah's throat contracted and she coughed dryly a couple of times.

"Would it be too much hassle if I had a glass of water and a headache pill before we... before I... start explaining?"

Without a word, Joy walked into the bathroom and found an Aspirin for Sarah. She went over to the kitchenette and took a glass that she proceeded to fill with water from the tap.

"Here," Joy said curtly as she handed Sarah the pill and the glass.

"Thank you."

Sarah quickly swallowed the pill and then emptied the glass of water. Like she had done with the can, she rolled the glass across her forehead to try to cool down.

"You look terrible," Joy said and sat down in the comfy chair. She swiveled it around so she could look at Sarah who was still standing up.

"I know."

"Sit down before you fall down."

"Thanks," Sarah said and sat down in the couch - just as her rear end made contact with the cushion, she remembered what had happened in that exact spot the night before and her headache turned from a dull ache to an incessant throbbing in a heartbeat.

"Sarah, I hope you understand how stupid you made me feel last night. As I said out in the hallway, I'm not in the habit of... of spreading my legs for just anybody, to put it bluntly."

"God, Joy, I..."

"I offered that to you because I felt I had finally made contact with you... with the real you. I could feel the real you when we kissed and I wanted to connect to that, body and soul. But you let me down. Badly."

"I... I don't know what to say to that... except that you're right. I'm a piece of shit and I know it," Sarah said and leaned back in the seat.

"You have some issues, Sarah, that's for sure. I don't know if I'm qualified to help you with them."

"I understand," Sarah said, suddenly feeling her insides sink into a black hole.

Joy shook her head and folded her legs up underneath her.

"Sarah... my head is telling me to kick you out, but my heart is begging me to give you another chance. There's no logical explanation, it just does. But you have to promise me that you'll get some help to deal with your issues."

Sarah stared dumbfoundedly at Joy - the actress' words hadn't yet penetrated the fog in Sarah's brain but she got the gist of them.

"I need to get my head checked, I know," Sarah said quietly.

"Do you have access to a psychologist at work?"

"No... I doubt they even know what that is."

Suddenly the telephone rang and Joy got up from the comfy chair.

"It's Joy ... yeah, that's all right, Dave ... no, I..."

The sound of the tumbler falling onto the floor made Joy spin around - Sarah had finally succumbed to the fatigue and the emotional strain and she had collapsed on the couch, snoring softly.

"Dave, something's just come up. I gotta go ... Yeah, I'll call you later ... Yeah, yeah, I'll get to the show in time ... I really gotta go ... Yeah. Bye."

Joy hung up and went over to the couch to help Sarah get more comfortable. She took off Sarah's trainers and moved her long legs up into the couch. It wasn't quite big enough for the tall woman, but with a little elbow grease, Joy was able to make her fit.

After moving the coffee table back so Sarah wasn't in any danger of hitting it if she fell off the couch, Joy went into the bedroom to find a pillow and a plaid for the soundly sleeping woman.

When Sarah finally woke up, it was already getting dark outside. She blinked several times and tried to focus on her watch. She couldn't quite see the small hands, but she thought it read eight-thirty, PM.

She rubbed her face and sat up on the couch. The plaid fell down on the floor and for a few seconds, Sarah thought the entire day had been a bad dream. When she looked around the apartment, she realized that it wasn't her own, but Joy's - and then it all came flooding back to her.

Sarah groaned and ran a hand through her sleep-tousled hair.

"Joy?"

Sarah's bladder sent out a distress signal, so she got up and staggered into the bathroom on stiff, weary legs. After taking care of business, she went over to the windows and pulled the curtains apart.

She checked her watch again - it really was half past eight in the evening.

"Shit, I've slept the entire day..." Sarah said out loud.

She turned around and spotted a small letter lying on the coffee table. She went over to it and picked it up.

'Hi, Sarah. I have to go down to the show, but I'll be back at nine at the latest. I'll bring some food, as I'm sure you'll be starved. Joy.'

As if on cue, Sarah's stomach growled loudly and Sarah remembered that the only thing she had eaten the entire day was a quick bite of Kimberly's pancake - and that was more than ten hours ago.

Twenty minutes later, Joy unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Sarah was sitting in the comfy chair watching the news, but she turned off the TV as soon as she saw that Joy was carrying a large plastic bag.

"Let me help you with that," Sarah said and shot up from the chair.

"No, I got it. I bought some sandwiches and a couple of Cokes. I hope it's all right...?"

"Sandwiches? Oh, yeah, I could use a sandwich right now. They sure smell good," Sarah said, prompting a new growl from her stomach.

Joy chuckled and pulled out six neatly wrapped sandwiches and four cans of Coca-Cola from the plastic bag.

"Chicken, ham-and-cheese, cucumber, shrimps and eggs in mayo, roast beef and corned beef. I didn't really know what you'd like the best, so I just took one of each."

"Oh, I eat pretty much everything," Sarah said and cracked open one of the cans of Coke.

"All right. I'll take the chicken and the roast beef. You get the rest," Joy said and crouched down to find two plates and two tumblers in the sideboard.

"Oh, that's unfair..."

"I already had a few snacks down at the theater. And besides, you need it more. You're still quite grey around the gills."

"I didn't sleep last night," Sarah said with a shrug.

"Hmmm. Let's talk while we eat," Joy said, smiling almost reluctantly at Sarah.

Not long after, Joy unwrapped the roast beef sandwich and started eating.

"Please try to explain to me what's going on inside your mind when you bolt," Joy said and wiped her mouth on a napkin.

Sarah mirrored Joy by unwrapping her cucumber sandwich, but then paused while she was composing her thoughts.

"Well. A little voice in my ear tells me that..."

"You hear voices?" Joy said, stopping mid-chew to stare at Sarah.

"My conscience."

"Oh..." Joy said. She kept staring at Sarah, just in case.

"Let me rephrase that... my conscience tells me that... that... oh, it's so hard to put words on my emotions. I think I'm just scared..."

"You're scared of me? Of me, who's a good five inches shorter than you?"

"Not 'scared' scared... scared of the commitment, of the intimacy, of... of revealing the person underneath the mask."

"But Sarah, we're talking just fine now. Why is it different when the situation turns intimate?"

"I don't know. I can't explain it," Sarah said with a heartfelt sigh. She took a large bite out of the cucumber sandwich and leaned back in the comfy chair.

"All right. Sarah... what are you planning on doing now?"

Sarah swallowed hard and locked eyes with Joy.

"Well... I was... planning on... I don't know," Sarah said and looked away.

"Staying here with me?"

"Yeah. I suppose."

"Do you think that would work?"

"I'm hoping it would."

"It's going to take me a little while to get back to the level of trust I had in you before last night, Sarah."

"I understand."

"But in the meantime... I guess you could stay here. With me," Joy said and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

Sarah looked up, the food forgotten.

"Really?"

"Yeah. On one condition."

"Anything. I'll do anything..."

"I don't like to be used or toyed with. If you hurt me again like last night, I'll kick you out on your ass faster than you can spell your own name. There, I've said it. It's your choice," Joy said strongly, pointing her index finger at Sarah as she spoke.

"I'll never, ever do that again, Joy. I promise," Sarah said, feeling tears sting her eyes.

"That's all I can ask of you," Joy said and got up from the couch. She went over to stand in front of Sarah and pulled the taller woman up from the chair.

Suddenly pensive, Sarah didn't really know what was going to happen and as usual when she wasn't in control, she could feel a little flame of fear flickering somewhere deep inside her.

Joy put her arms around Sarah and pulled her into a loving hug. For the first few heartbeats, Sarah froze, but when she felt the warmth of Joy's body seep through her T-shirt, she let go of all her fears and just allowed herself to melt into the embrace.

Tears began to run down Sarah's cheeks and she let out a heartfelt sigh that effectively purged all the negativity she had kept bottled up inside her for so long.

"Are you all right?" Joy said, suddenly worried about Sarah's uncharacteristic display of emotions.

"I've never felt better," Sarah whispered, tightening her grip on Joy.

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DAY 9 - SUNDAY, MAY 16TH

Sarah rolled over onto her back and stared at the patterns of light dancing across the ceiling. She turned her head to look at the clock - 7:49, AM.

Next to her, Joy stirred with a moan and a throaty grunt. The actress yawned widely and reached out with her hand, searching for something to hold on to.

Sarah helped Joy's hand find a target by pulling it up to her lips and giving Joy's knuckles a gentle kiss.

"Good morning," Sarah whispered.

"'Mornin'."

Joy yawned again, a gesture that made Sarah mimic her.

"Jeez, I better get up right away. If I stay here too long, I'll just fall asleep again," Sarah said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

"Oh, already?" Joy said, her voice muffled from the pillow she was resting her head on.

"Yeah. I have a busy day ahead of me."

"I know... but it's just so damn early," Joy said with a sigh.

Half an hour later, Sarah had showered and finished packing her things. As she sat down on the couch and tied her shoelaces, she couldn't quite fathom how different everything was compared to the day before.

'What a difference a day makes,' Sarah thought and propped up her head on her arm.

She looked over at the bathroom where Joy was busy showering, and started thinking about the surprising events of the night before. Out of the blue, Joy had asked if Sarah wanted to share the bed with her - 'to sleep, no funny business' as Joy had so eloquently put it.

Sarah chuckled to herself when she remembered the expression Joy had on her face as she said it. Her blonde eyebrow had gone up and the corner of her mouth had gone down. All in all, at that moment, Joy was cuter than words could describe.

Sarah had felt a split second of trepidation, but she had accepted - and now she was glad she had. She had rarely felt more comfortable, even when Joy had turned over in her sleep and put her arm across Sarah's chest, just below her breasts.

With those pleasant images filling her mind, Sarah chuckled again and went over to the telephone. She dialed Kimberly's number and waited for someone to pick up the phone.

'It's Ellen, how can I help ya?'

"Hey, Ellen, it's Sarah," Sarah said and carried the cordless handset over to the windows where she looked down at the parking lot.

'Hi... so, what's that I hear about you managing to get two weeks' vacation out of one?'

"Ha, yeah, that's true."

'Are you still with... whatsername?'

"Joy. Yep, still here."

'Good. I hope you'll get the most out of it. I'll get Kimmie for ya. Hang on.'

"Sure. Nice talking to you," Sarah said, but Ellen had already put down the phone.

'Kimberly speakin!'

"Hey, Kimmie. What's up?"

'You're asking me? What's up with you? Are you still...?'

"Yeah, I'm still here," Sarah said with a laugh.

'How the hell are you, hon?'

"Oh, I'm doing fine. Real fine. Listen, I was wondering if you would come and pick me up at the airport later this afternoon? If the plane is on schedule, I'll land at four PM."

'Oh, you better believe I'll be there! And I'm gonna lock you in my car until you've told me everything. So you're going back to work now?'

"Yeah, I have to. Joy's going to do the show for another week, but I'd have to call in sick for an entire week, so... yeah, I'm going home."

'And later?'

"Well, I'm not really sure yet..." Sarah looked back at the closed door to the bathroom before continuing "... but Joy and I have arranged that she'll fly to Columbus on Monday, June seventh."

'Oh, that's so flippin' great, Sarah!'

"Yeah. And then she's gonna stay with me for a week. Just to see how we get along on a daily basis and stuff."

'Wow. So you're serious, then?'

"Well... I am, yes. And I think she is, too."

'Too cool, Sarah. Just too flippin' cool. I'm really happy for you. So, anyway, what's been going on, huh?'

"Well, this and that."

'Uhhh, Sarah, have you had any, you know, problems with... you know?'

"No, we haven't, thank God. She threatened to kick me out on my ass if I caused any trouble, so I'm keeping on my best behaviour."

'Which can be rather charming, hon.'

"Aw, shucks, Kimmie."

'Have you had make-up sex yet?'

"Kimmie! You're fixated on that subject, you know that? Gawd, how many times have you asked me that now..."

'Is that a yes or a no?'

"Oh, get a grip, woman. I'm not gonna answer you!"

'OK, that's a no, then. Well, I'm sure you'll get around to it eventually. Ellen and me, you know, we cleared that hurdle pretty quickly, and once we did...'

"I'm sure you did, but I don't wanna hear about it!" Sarah said and covered her eyes with her hand.

"Hear about what?" Joy said, wrapping a towel around her body.

"Uhhh... nothing. I'm talking to Kimmie," Sarah said, holding up the phone.

"Hi, Kimberly!" Joy shouted as she went into the bedroom to get changed.

'Hi, Joy!'

"Kimmie says hi," Sarah said with a grin.

'So Joy's gonna swing by in a little more than two weeks from now, huh?'

"Yeah. Man, I can't quite believe it," Sarah said and sat down in the comfy chair. She crossed her legs at the knees and started playing with one of her shoelaces.

'Roses. You gotta remember a bouquet of red roses. That needs to be the first thing she sees when she sets foot in your apartment.'

"Good thinking. There's a ton of things I have to remember. I better make a list."

'I'll come over and help you get ready.'

"Thanks, buddy. I'm gonna need you help."

'Sarah... how do you actually feel about it?'

"Well, I'm... I still have an unusual sensation in my stomach, but this time it's happiness. I have a very good feeling about the whole situation, Kimmie."

After hearing those words, Joy peeked around the corner and sent Sarah a beaming, genuine smile that would have made Sarah's knees weak if she hadn't already been sitting down - as it was, Sarah felt her heart beat faster and she returned the smile.

'That's super, Sarah. Anyway, Ellen's kinda yanking my chain here, so... I'll pick you up at the airport at around four or so.'

"That'd be great, thanks. See you then, Kimmie. Oh, by the way, that chain comment... that was just a figure of speech... right?"

'Uhhh... yeah. Sorta. See ya later, Sarah,' Kimberly said and hung up.

Sarah let the cordless handset fall into her lap. She took a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

Joy came out of the bedroom, wearing a TruAmerica terrycloth bathrobe. She leaned against the doorjamb and started running a brush through her unruly mop of hair.

"So..." Joy said.

"Yeah?"

"I've enjoyed having you here with me, Sarah," Joy said and threw the brush into the bedroom.

Sarah wasn't ready for that, so she blushed and looked down.

"Well, I've really enjoyed being here," she said quietly.

"We got off to a rocky start, but I'm glad I gave you another chance, Sarah. I've liked what I've seen. And besides, if there's one thing I've learned from my twenty years on the stage, it's that if the dress rehearsal sucks, the premiere is guaranteed to be fantastic," Joy said, moving closer to Sarah.

"I know exactly what you mean," Sarah said and got up from the chair. She moved over to the phone and put the handset on the base station.

"Mmmm. How long do we have until you leave?"

"Oh... slightly less than an hour," Sarah said after checking her watch.

"Mmmm. Plenty of time," Joy purred and stepped closer still to Sarah.

Sarah opened her mouth, but closed it again at once. She felt a pleasant buzz wash over her - one that held great promises, but at the same time carried certain obligations. She knew where they were headed and she also knew that it was the acid test of their young relationship. If she let Joy down now, she could literally kiss everything goodbye.

In a heartbeat, Sarah closed the distance between herself and Joy and held the shorter woman tight. She was rewarded by a beaming smile that was cut short when Sarah leaned down and claimed Joy's lips.

Even though they only had an hour, they didn't want to rush matters - instead they allowed the kiss to be a long and sensuous affair that ignited both women to the point of spontaneous combustion.

When they finally broke off to get some much needed air into their lungs, Joy pulled back slightly and lifted Sarah's T-shirt out of her jeans. With a grin, she let her fingers run gently up and down Sarah's long torso, probing and exploring as she went along.

Sarah instantly got goosebumps all over and she couldn't hold back a soft moan that seemed to spur Joy on even more.

With a wicked grin, Joy leaned in and began to nibble on Sarah's jaw and throat. Moving her mouth closer to Sarah's ear, she began to play with the earlobe by taking it between her lips and gently squeezing it. She flicked it back and forth a couple of times with her tongue and then moved back around to reclaim Sarah's lips.

During all this sweet torture, Sarah completely lost her ability to think. All she could do was feel, and every time Joy's lips or tongue touched her skin, a jolt of electricity shot through her body. When Joy started playing with her earlobe, Sarah could feel her nipples grow rigid in a matter of seconds and her center began to throb in a way it hadn't done in years.

As their tongues began a slow, sensual dance, Sarah closed her eyes and whimpered needily into Joy's mouth.

'If she keeps this up, I'm gonna come before I even get my pants off,' Sarah thought, but still went on with the kiss - suddenly, her eyes popped wide open.

Unnoticed, Joy had moved her hand down to rest on Sarah's beltbuckle. In a slow, teasing motion, she moved her hand down even further and ran her fingers across Sarah's throbbing center, applying just the right amount of pressure through the jeans to make the already highly sensitive spot become almost painfully alert.

The sensation nearly sent Sarah over the edge and she grabbed Joy and pulled her close. She buried her head in the nook of Joy's shoulder and let out a trembling moan.

"C'mon," Joy said, reaching for Sarah's hand.

"Oh, Joy..." Sarah whispered. She took the offered hand and followed Joy into the bedroom...

THE END

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