

~ A Safe Place ~

by Xenasgrrl

Disclaimers: This is my little spin on the usual, kind of switched our favorite leading ladies roles around, so yes, there is some vague resemblance, but mostly they are just figments of my imagination.

Warnings: R rated material alert! Yes, there is sex between two women in this story, so if you find that offensive, well- too bad.

Go away. If you're just too young to be reading this or it's illegal where you come from...wait a few years, or move!

***There are references to a brutal rape in this story, but it is not described in any detail, and it is a thing of the past (doesn't occur during the story). Still, I know this is a very sensitive subject, and may upset or trigger some people, so please read at your own risk.

There is also mention of self-injury (cutting, etc), so again if this is something that may trigger you, please be aware.

Dedication: For my sweetheart, Leigh, who is my best friend, soul mate, love of my life...and my biggest fan. Thank you for keeping me (semi) sane this last year, baby.

Thank you to my beta reader Chris for the encouragement, it was the nudge I needed to finally post this story.

Please send any feedback to xenasgrrl@hotmail.com

This is my first posted fan fic, so I would really appreciate any feedback, critical or otherwise.

Thank you and pleasant reading!

Something covered her mouth, and they pulled her to the ground, dragged her behind the bushes. Strong hands held her wrists, and her feet...she heard the cloth as it was ripped from her, felt the cold night air as her skin was exposed.

Hard, bruising fingers dug into her, even as she struggled and kicked to get away from them. A gleam of silver flashed as a knife blade pressed to her throat...

Oh god, please don't kill me...I'll do anything just don't kill me, I don't want to die.

She felt a white hot flash of pain at her throat, and she couldn't breathe.

She opened her mouth and screamed.

A pair of hands startled her awake, shaking her gently.

"Paige...wake up. It's just a dream," she heard a voice from far away...her eyes blinked in the near dark. She was confused, still half-asleep and half-awake.

Her heart pounded in her chest and she gasped for air. She clutched at her throat, and felt the ache deep down inside.

"Paige...are you ok?" she heard the voice again, this time closer. "You were screaming."

A light came on suddenly, blinding her. She squinted and looked around, fearfully.

Then gradually it all came back into focus. The hospital...she was at the hospital. The beds were clean and white, the room bare and sterile. Cathy, her roommate was in the bed next to her, looking at her wide-eyed.

Paige sat on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands, breathing hard.

"I'm fine. Go to sleep."

"You were having a nightmare again," Cathy said.

"I know. I was there," Paige said, bitterly. "Go back to bed."

Cathy lay back down and switched off the light. Paige sat still for a few minutes, and then walked to the bathroom. Closing the door, she switched on the light. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror.

"You look like shit," she mumbled to herself, in a flat voice.

Her long dark hair was a tangled mess. She had dark circles under her eyes, almost like bruises, and her eyes were bloodshot. The white scar on her throat stood out glaringly in the harsh fluorescent light.

She splashed some cold water on her face, and then stood there, letting it drip onto her white tank top. She should have been cold in just her boxers and tank, but she didn't really feel it. She sank down onto the floor, her back resting against the door, letting out a long deep sigh. It was going to be another long night.

Madison looked up from her file, as the door to her office opened. Trisha, the nurse opened it.

"Dr. Nichols, your three o'clock is here, should I let her in?" she asked.

"Thanks Trish, let her in," Madison said, smiling. She set down the file she was perusing and rolled her neck back and forth, hearing it pop. She ran her fingers through her unruly hair, trying to smooth it down. She was tired and not looking forward to another intake, but at least this was her last appointment for the day.

The door opened again and a girl shuffled in, eyes downcast, her shoulders slumped. Even so, Madison noted she was tall and far too thin. She wore ripped jeans, a baggy grey sweatshirt and black converse. The file said she was twenty-one, but she looked much younger.

"You must be Paige," Madison said, standing and smiling at the girl, even though she had yet to look up or make eye contact. "Have a seat anywhere."

She watched as Paige glanced around the room and walked over to the chair farthest from her. It didn't surprise her.

She walked around the desk, sitting in a chair opposite her.

"I'm Dr. Nichols, it's nice to meet you, Paige," she said. Paige didn't look up, her face closed off; the only sign of life was her chewing on her bottom lip anxiously.

"I see from your file you checked in here at Palo Alto on Friday night, is that right?" Madison asked, wanting to know if she could get any answer out of her.

Paige nodded curtly.

"And you checked yourself in here willingly, Paige?" Madison asked.

She watched as Paige's brow furrowed in frustration. After a long silence, she finally spoke.

"I guess so."

"You've been having nightmares?" Madison prompted, beginning to get the feeling she was going to be here a long, long time.

The girl looked up, her eyes finally connecting with Madison's. They were a striking, pale blue, almost translucent. Madison had never seen eyes that shade of blue, and they momentarily mesmerized her.

"Yes," Paige said.

"We have medication that could help with that," Madison began.

"No!" Paige said, loudly. "No drugs. No pills."

Madison regarded her, taken aback by the sudden outburst.

"Well...I just want to be clear, Paige...these pills are only temporary. They can help you sleep, but they won't fix the problem. I don't rely on drugs to help people with the reasons why they are here. That's sort of my job," she smiled.

"No pills." Paige repeated, not acknowledging Madison's slight attempt at humor.

"Ok...no pills." Madison agreed. "Why are you here, Paige?" she finally asked.

Again, there seemed to be an inner struggle within the girl. She covered her face in her hands, her long dark hair hanging down hiding her.

"You have the file," she finally said, from beneath her hands.

Madison didn't reply to this. She wanted to hear it from her own lips.

They sat there quietly, and she waited. At last, Paige looked up, slowly lifting her head as though it was heavy.

"I'm here because my family wants me to be here. Because they think I'm "disturbed and crazy."
"

"Do you think you're crazy?" Madison asked.

Paige gave a short bitter laugh. "Typical," she mumbled. "No...I don't think I'm crazy. I don't know...maybe I am. They thought I was trying to kill myself," she added.

Madison didn't ask the obvious question, but waited, patiently.

"I wasn't...trying to kill myself," Paige continued. "I just want it to stop. I just want...to sleep. Without the dreams. I want peace."

"You don't think taking a bottle of sleeping pills and cutting your wrists is trying to kill yourself?" Madison asked, her voice gentle.

Paige looked at her again, her eyes flaring with rage. "No. I wanted peace. Not death. I'm not stupid. I didn't...I didn't go through all of this just to go and fucking kill myself," she said, her voice growing louder. Madison was surprised Paige came this close to even mentioning the rape. She hadn't expected it.

"And the wrist wasn't even the same night. That was different." Madison noticed the many thin white scars that ran across Paige's inner left arm.

Madison nodded. "I know," she said. Paige looked up again, her eyes looking large and confused. So much pain, Madison thought, it hurt to look at them for very long. She found herself looking away.

"Why do you cut yourself?"

"I don't know," said Paige, her voice so quiet it was almost inaudible.

Madison nodded.

"Paige, I want you to consider taking some pills to help with the nightmares. You can't begin to deal with all of this unless you have some rest."

"I get plenty of rest," Paige said defiantly.

"I hear you wake up at least once a night with nightmares, and you usually don't go back to bed afterward," Madison said, pointedly.

Paige let out a snort of disgust at her blabbering roommate. She wondered what else Cathy shared with everyone else.

"No pills, Dr Nichols."

Madison sighed. "Ok. No pills. Paige, I want to help you, but you have want it for yourself. I am not going to fight you every step of the way. You're obviously here for a reason...I hope you'll let me help you." she paused, looking for any flicker of acceptance in the girls stony face.

Seeing none, she went on. "I'll schedule an appointment with you for tomorrow. I'm here most mornings catching up on paperwork, if you ever want to come and see me," she added.

Paige stood up and walked to the door. As Madison stood to let her out, she saw the scar on the girl's throat. She must have let her gaze linger too long. Paige's eyes hardened.

"I don't need your pity, doctor. I just want to get rid of these nightmares and get out of here."

"Paige-" Madison put her hand out, and saw Paige flinch back. Madison opened her mouth to say something else but Paige was already out the door, closing it loudly behind her.

Back at home, Madison sighed as she collapsed on the sofa, propping her feet up. She rolled her neck, feeling a headache coming on. She wasn't sure if she was just tired or coming down with a migraine, but it felt like today would never end. Ever since she got the position as Chief of Staff of the young women's unit at Palo Alto Mental Health Facility last year, work consumed all of her time. It was an honor to get this position at the age of thirty-three, but it left little room in her

life for anything else.

She hadn't been able to keep a long-term relationship going, ever...the few men she dated couldn't seem to compete for her attention and focus on her career. The one constant in her life was Julia, her best friend since college. Madison checked her phone messages and sure enough had a message from Julia.

"Maddie? Its Julia...I haven't heard from you in weeks so call me. I mean it! If I don't hear from you in 24 hours I am coming over and breaking in. You know I will. I love ya babe."

Madison laughed and hung up. She didn't even have the energy to call her back, but she knew she'd have to sooner or later.

Even as she turned the TV on, flipping through the channels, her mind continued to wander back to her work, especially the last client of the day.

Paige Randall. Her mind flashed between the grim details in her file and those pain filled eyes. It had been 6 months since the girl's rape, apparently a random attack near the girl's dorm, in a park. There had been three men involved, and they had never been caught. Madison wondered if this was part of why the girl was plagued by nightmares. She knew that sometimes it helped bring closure when the rapists were caught, although often didn't really matter much in the healing process.

She read the medical reports, she knew Paige was badly beaten and viciously raped, suffered numerous physical injuries, but it told her nothing about the state of her mind. It was hard not to become emotionally involved in these cases, to avoid getting caught up in the horror of the incident, but Madison quickly squashed the pain and sympathy she felt for Paige. That wouldn't help her...what she needed was her professional help...and more sleep. Not that she was one to talk, Madison chuckled to herself. She usually stayed up far too late and didn't get nearly enough sleep herself.

Madison, however, was not opposed to taking the occasional sleeping aid to help her reach that goal, and tonight more than any other lately, she wanted blissful escape. She tried to block thoughts of the dark haired girl from her mind as she chased the pills down with a glass of water and curled up on the sofa, pulling her blanket over her. She had a huge bed in her master bedroom, but she usually slept here, with the TV on. It seemed...less lonely. The last conscious image Madison had before the pills took their desired effect was a pair of haunting pale blue eyes, pleading silently with her for help.

Cafeteria food always seemed disgusting to Paige, and Palo Alto was no exception to the rule. Paige grimaced as she tried to stomach the watery eggs and limp bacon. She sat next to her roommate Cathy, but only because she had no one else to sit with. Cathy needed to be monitored

during and after meals because of her bulimia, so there was a counselor sitting nearby, keeping an eye on her.

Paige soon gave up forcing the disgusting food down and went to walk around. There was a large common room with sofas where patients could sit and watch TV. There was a music room, a gym, and an art room. *Like high school*, Paige thought, with a wry smile. *We even have the exact same cafeteria ladies here.*

Down the hall by the nurse's station, Paige saw the Doctor she had spoken to yesterday talking and laughing with Trisha, one of the nurses. Dr. Madison Nichols. She looked so...crisp and clean, like the hospital. She wore a green long sleeved shirt, and black slacks. Paige couldn't help admire her from afar. Her blonde hair was sleek and smooth and hung in choppy layers down to her shoulders.

She looks so put together, so pretty, she thought. She ran her fingers through her unkempt dark hair and glanced over her baggy jeans and grey thermal shirt. She felt a sense of dread as she walked over to her, but she had an appointment. Might as well get it over with.

"Paige! Hello," Madison said, surprised to see her show up early.

"Hi," Paige mumbled.

"Let's go sit down in my office," Madison suggested, and led the way. Her office was large and spacious, with plenty of light from the large windows. At the center of the room was a polished dark Mahogany desk, with several plush chairs in front of it. A soft looking couch lay in the far corner of the room. She had a few pieces of artwork displayed but nothing that cluttered the room.

Paige chose the same chair she had the day before, and Madison came to sit closer to her again, a notebook in hand.

"How do you like it here so far?" Madison asked, cheerfully, as if she was staying at a fancy hotel and she was a hostess.

"It's alright, I guess," Paige replied. "Bad food."

Madison chuckled. "I agree. I always try to bring lunch from home."

Paige noticed her eyes matched her blouse, and wondered if she had planned it that way.

"Paige, I wanted to apologize for yesterday. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, when I looked at your scar."

Paige wasn't used to such directness, and floundered for something to say.

"Doesn't matter," she finally said, and shrugged. "It's just a scar," she said, flinging her dark hair

over her shoulder flippantly.

"Alright, so why don't we start out by getting some background information...tell me a little about your family, your childhood...anything you want," Madison said, all business now. She crossed her legs and picked up her notebook and pencil, looking at Paige expectantly.

Paige fidgeted in her seat, wishing she could just escape. She realized she would have to give the woman something to work with.

"Well...my dad is a computer software developer. My mother works in a dental office. I have a brother, he's 15. I grew up here in Seattle and went to WSU until last semester," she said in a rush.

"Are you close to your brother?" Madison asked, scribbling notes down in her notebook.

"Nope."

"Do you have many friends, at school or...just in general?" Madison asked, glancing up.

Paige scowled. "Not anymore," she said. "Just my best friend Leah. We've know each other since like...birth."

"Can you tell me what you meant about not anymore...with your friends? Why not anymore?"

Paige hesitated. "I meant after I was...attacked. Most of my friends were just party friends...they didn't exactly stick around to pick up the pieces when I stopped being fun," she remarked, bitterly.

"Some people are not equipped to handle situations like that, but it's not a good feeling regardless is it?" Madison asked, but Paige didn't bother responding.

"Leah sounds like a good friend to have. Does she still live nearby?"

"Yeah...but she's busy with school and her boyfriend." Paige explained. She didn't want to tell the Doctor that Leah too had withdrawn somewhat since the attack. What kind of person had no friends?

"What were you studying at WSU?" Madison asked, chewing on her pencil. Paige smiled inside at the contrast between the woman who looked so mature and sophisticated, chewing a pencil like a twelve year old.

"Pre-law," Paige said, her tone making it clear she did not like the subject.

"Is that what you want to do, practice law?" Madison asked, sounding intrigued.

"No. It's what my parents want me to do. They pay the bills, so...that's what I'm doing. Or what I

was doing. Before." She added stiffly.

"Why did you leave school, Paige?" Madison asked, leaning forward in her chair.

"I- I just couldn't deal with it, being around all those people and answering questions. I couldn't focus on the school work...especially without any sleep"

Madison nodded. "I can imagine it would have been very difficult."

"My parents want me "fixed" so I can go back to school," Paige said, her voice dull and flat.

"Is that what you want to do?" Madison pressed.

"I don't really know what I want," Paige said, as she ran her fingers through her hair, tugging it in frustration

"And how about your parents, Paige...are you close to either of them? Have they been...supportive during this difficult time for you?"

Paige gave a scornful short laugh and shook her head. "Supportive? Ha! Um, No. They don't give a rat's ass about me," she blurted, feeling embarrassed of the descriptive answer as soon as it left her mouth.

"Maybe they just don't know how to show it," Madison suggested. Paige shrugged...she wasn't going to waste her time trying to explain her mother to the Doctor.

Madison sat there for a long time, looking at her. Paige began to squirm nervously, wishing the session would end. Her eyes were fixed on her hands.

"How are you sleeping, Paige?" Madison asked at last.

"Fine."

Madison sighed, eyeing the dark circles under her eyes, but she didn't push the issue.

"Ok. Well, I would like for you to start group therapy sessions tomorrow, with the women's group. Dr. Forbes leads the sessions and I think it could be really helpful for you. They meet at eleven a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays." She handed Paige a note to remind her.

"I will see you privately Tuesdays and Thursdays at three o'clock. Does that sound ok with you?" she asked, as if Paige had a choice in the matter. She just wanted to convince everyone that she was fine and get out of here.

"Yeah, fine," Paige said, gruffly. She stood up, eager to leave the office.

Madison rose from her chair and walked Paige to the door. "See you Thursday."

Paige nodded and quickly left the office.

"I swear, it's like pulling teeth to get this one to even tell me her name, let alone what's going on inside that head," Madison groaned. She leaned across Julia's kitchen counter, watching her friend chop mushrooms. Julia was married to Todd, and was the perfect little gourmet chef. Madison often came over for dinner, since she herself never cooked, especially not when it was just her at home, alone.

"Well, I am sure you will work your magic on her," Julia said, confidently. She knew if there was one thing her best friend could do well, it was helping people.

Madison laughed. "I'm glad one of us has such confidence in my skills," she rolled her eyes. She picked up her glass of wine and took a sip, letting the warm red liquid soothe her.

Todd walked into the kitchen and up to his wife, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

"And how are my two favorite girls doing tonight?" he asked, grinning at Madison.

"Hey there, tall dark and handsome," Madison greeted him.

"Maddie was just expressing her frustrations with work," Julia offered helpfully, smiling and kissing her husband on the cheek.

"You work too much," Todd said, stating the obvious.

Madison grinned watching the two together. She was insanely envious of the solid relationship they had, they were incredibly romantic, made each other laugh, and seemed so...relaxed together. Madison never felt relaxed with any boyfriend she had ever had.

"Thanks for letting me leech off you two again," she said to Todd, handing him a glass of wine.

"You know you're always welcome in our home...and for that matter, in our bed," Todd said, winking, but keeping a straight face. Julia smacked him and threatened him with a knife. Madison just laughed loudly, used to Todd's innocent flirtations.

"Julia is like my sister. That would be wrong on so many levels, you sicko," she chided Todd.

"Hey, you can't blame a guy for trying," he shrugged, trying to look sorry but failing miserably. "I cannot be around such beauty and not at least try. Besides, who said anything about the two of you together?" he grinned, and quickly ran out of the kitchen.

Julia groaned. "I apologize for my sixteen year old teenage husband trapped in the body of a thirty-five year old," she smirked.

"Eh, I'm used to it," Madison said, smiling. As she sipped her wine and watched her friend sauté vegetables, Madison's mind kept wandering back to Paige. Something about her, the raw vulnerability, got to her. She wondered how she was faring tonight, and whether she would get any sleep.

She shook herself and turned back to Julia, forcing herself to leave work behind. She wanted to enjoy this night and forget all about the world she was usually so immersed in.

Group therapy was quickly turning out to be Paige's least favorite scheduled activity. Every second of it was torture. There were eight other patients in the women's group. Cathy, her roommate was one of them, and the rest were here for various issues, from depression to drug addiction. Paige didn't really relate to any of the women and didn't want to discuss her own problems with them, but she wasn't given much choice. She had to go, and if she was ever going to get a clean bill of health for discharge she knew she had to cooperate, but she did so reluctantly and shared the least amount of information possible.

The group was led by Dr. Sarah Forbes, a young intern. Paige took an immediate dislike to her, sensing the woman's lack of experience and confidence.

"Today we are going to discuss taking responsibility for our own actions," Dr. Forbes said, in a false singsong voice that irritated Paige no end.

The girls went around in a circle, expressing their feeling and talking about how they were responsible for their own behaviors. Then it came to Paige's turn.

"Paige, do you have anything you'd like to share?" Dr. Forbes looked at her expectantly.

"No."

"Maybe we'll come back to you a little later," Dr. Forbes said, patronizingly.

"I have nothing to say," Paige repeated, louder. One of the girls, Kris, muttered something under her breath.

"What did you say?" Paige asked, leaning over in her chair, her eyes narrow.

Kris looked up and tossed her blonde hair. "I said you talk enough in your sleep to make up for it," she sneered.

Paige tensed and thought about punching the girl, but stood up and started walking out.

"Paige, please come back! I think we need to discuss this," Dr. Forbes called after her.

"Go discuss fucking yourselves," Paige shouted back at the group, and walked out the door.

Apparently, telling your group therapy Doctor and fellow patients to go fuck themselves was not "conducive to the healing environment" they were going for. The next day in her session with Dr. Nichols, Paige was informed of this minor detail.

"Sorry," she mumbled, glowering and looking not at all sorry.

"I hoped that you could get some support from the other women here, Paige," Madison said. "You need a support system. It really makes all the difference in this process."

"Ok...I get it. I'll try harder next time."

"Paige...do you have any questions you want to ask me? I mean, you told me why your family wants you here. Why do you want to be here? What would you like to see happen during your stay here?" Madison asked her. The question seemed to stump Paige.

"What do I want? Um..." she bit her lip, looking perplexed. "I don't know. I want to be normal," she finally said.

"What does normal mean for you, Paige?"

"I just want to go back to my life before this happened. I want my friends back, I want to walk down the street and not be afraid all the time. I want to sleep," she said, putting her head in her hands. "And not see the same things night after night. I want to stop feeling like I'm going crazy," she said, and looked up. Madison was struck again at the intensity of the eyes holding her own. The pleading look in them made her want to scoop her up and tell her it was all going to be fine. But she knew it was never that simple.

"Paige...what you are feeling *is* normal, for you...for what you've been through. I don't ever want you to think of yourself as crazy, or anything like that. You are strong, you are a survivor!" Madison's eyes lit up as she spoke, wanting to infuse some of her strength, her hope, into this shell of a girl.

"I promise you, things can get better. Being here is a great way to expose yourself to being around people in a safe environment. But you have to open yourself up to it, be willing to try.

You can't fight it. The healing will begin when you decide that you are important enough to do the work."

Paige seemed to struggle with these words. "I don't know how," she cried, as the tears slipped down her face.

Madison looked over at her, seeing the icy façade chip slowly away.

"I think you've already begun," she said, smiling at her.

Paige awoke with a gasp, clutching at her throat. She expected to feel warm blood pouring from it, but it didn't take her long this time to realize it had been a dream...the same dream, as always. Cathy apparently decided to stay out of her way, after Paige yelled at her earlier that day to stay out of her business and keep her mouth shut. Paige stumbled from her bed and into the bathroom, her sanctuary.

As she sat on the bathroom floor, trembling, she eyed her scarred wrist. God, what she wouldn't give for a razor blade right now...or a sharp knife...box cutter...glass...anything. That wasn't going to happen here, though, and she knew it. *There are no sharp objects allowed in a funny farm*, she thought, smiling at her morbid sense of humor. All she wanted was something to take the edge off. Just a little. Something to dull the pain inside.

She began to bite on her lip, and the sharp pain from her teeth digging into the tender flesh felt good. She bit harder, hearing a soft crunch, and then again, until she tasted blood. Feeling the adrenalin pulse through her, it felt...good. So good. She wanted more. She began to hit herself in the mouth with her knuckles, where her lip was already bleeding. Slowly the movements became harder, using her entire fist to hit her mouth. The emotions began bubbling up to the surface. The anger, the rage, the pain.

She liked the way the heavy impact felt, the way it made her teeth smash into the tender flesh inside her mouth. The repetitive motion was comforting, the pain a relief.

I'm not crazy, Paige thought...even as she continued to batter her own lips until the blood flowed down her knuckles and she felt her bottom lip swelling. She was punishing herself for what a fuck up she was...she was hurting herself, hurting all of them...everyone who had hurt her, turned their back on her, and abandoned her.

I am not crazy.

When the pager went off, Madison groped around for it in the dark, knocking her glass of water off onto the carpeted floor.

"Damn it!" she cursed, opening bleary eyes to look around for the small black pager. She grasped it and pressed the button to see the number. It was the hospital, of course. 911...shit. An emergency. Of course. It was still dark outside and she wasn't sure what time it was. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and picked up her cell phone.

"This is Dr. Nichols, someone paged me?"

"Um yeah, Dr Nichols? This is Carol...we have a patient of yours here, we believe she's hurting herself and we are trying to restrain her but she is giving the orderlies a hard time. I need your permission to sedate her," the flustered nurse said.

"Who is it?" Madison asked, still trying to pull herself from the groggy drug induced sleep.

"Paige...Paige Randall," Carol said, not sounding very happy.

Hearing her name, Madison felt a rush of adrenaline, waking her up effectively. "What did she do?"

"We don't really know...her roommate heard sounds from the bathroom and called us in, the orderlies tried to open the bathroom door but she is all worked up, won't let them in and keeps screaming and bashing her head against the door when they try," Carol said.

"Dr. Nichols? Can we go in and subdue and sedate her?"

"No! No...I'm coming down...I'll be there in 15 minutes. Tell everyone to just stay away from her till I get there...do you understand?" she asked sounding panicked, already pulling on her jeans.

"Alright Dr, I'll tell them," Carol said and hung up.

She dressed and ran out the door, cursing under her breath. She never liked to see her patients forcibly sedated or drugged, and the paperwork that went along with an incident like this was enormous...but that wasn't what really bothered her. It was the thought of Paige, hurting herself. It made Madison's stomach clench painfully.

She knew how Paige felt about drugs. And she knew having two or three big orderlies pin her down and stick a needle in her arm would do so much more damage than she could probably do to herself...not physically, but emotionally. And just when Paige seemed to be responding! Madison raced down the deserted roads to the hospital. It was 4:25 a.m.

Madison heard the screams long before she reached the room. She raced down the hallway, seeing patients peek their heads out the door, curiously. There were several nurses clustered around a bedroom door, and Madison ran to it, pushing past them. Inside the room she saw two orderlies wrestling Paige to the floor, struggling to restrain her flailing arms and legs. Paige was screaming hysterically and thrashing around.

"No! Get off me! Leave me alone! Stop! You're hurting me! Get OFF me!!!!!" she screamed.

"Get your fucking hands OFF her!" Madison yelled, rushing over to them and pushing the orderly's arms away. "I told you not to touch her!"

She looked at Carol with blazing eyes. The nurses and orderlies, having never seen Dr. Nichols in this state, let alone use that sort of language, were wide-eyed and silent.

"I'm sorry..." Carol stammered. "She was hitting her head against the door so hard and she was escalating and we felt we...had to, for her own safety."

Madison ignored her excuses. Paige had stopped screaming as the orderlies backed away slowly. She scooted backwards on the floor, sobbing loudly. Madison saw blood everywhere.

"Get out! Everyone out," Madison ordered, and the room cleared out instantly. Madison moved closer to Paige, kneeling down at her side.

"Paige, it's me, Dr. Nichols," she said, gently. Paige looked up at her, her eyes wide in terror. Madison was careful not to touch her. Her face was a mess, her lips swollen and bloody, her cheek bruised. She didn't see any other obvious injuries, she noted with relief, although there was blood on her white tank top and all over her hands and face. She fought back the cry that wanted to escape, the horror rising up in her throat.

Paige was still crying and whimpering, but as she slowly comprehended who Madison was, she hurled herself into her arms. Madison was almost knocked over by the impact, as she sat back hard on the floor and felt the girl cling to her, her arms wrapping around her neck as she sobbed into her.

"Please don't let them take me, don't let them hurt me," she cried. "Don't let them touch me! I don't want to be drugged ...please don't let them take me," she sobbed uncontrollably.

Madison tightened her arms around the girl, feeling fiercely protective of her.

"Paige, listen to me...I am not going to let anyone touch you, or do anything to you...do you understand?" she asked. Paige simply clung to her and wept. Madison stroked the girl's back gently. "I will not let them hurt you," she whispered, more to herself than to Paige. She pulled her head back and forced Paige to look into her eyes.

"Paige, look at me- I won't let anyone hurt you...ok?" she repeated, needing to see if she understood.

Paige nodded, tears mingling with blood and dripping down her face. She looked down and saw blood all over Madison's white shirt. "I'm sorry," she sobbed, as she buried her face in her neck once more.

"It's ok...I've got you," Madison said, rocking her slowly in her arms. Slowly, after long minutes of soft sobs and sniffles, Paige began to calm down. She stopped crying and lay limp in Madison's arms.

"Paige," Madison whispered, hearing the girl's breathing slowly return to normal, and become steadier.

"Please...don't let them take me. I'll go back to bed or...to another room if you want...they can lock me in but don't let them strap me down or...drug me, please," Paige pleaded, a note of hysteria creeping into her voice.

"Paige, I promised you I wouldn't let them touch you. I won't. There's a couch in my office...would you like to come lie down in there for a while? I'll be doing paperwork, so it'll be quiet in there," she offered, wondering where this was coming from. The couch was for her use when she pulled night shifts, or sometimes for patients during sessions. Still, being chief, she could pretty much do whatever she wanted, she thought, smugly. Somehow, the thought of having her close made her feel better. It was better than locking her in an observation room.

Paige seemed to contemplate the offer. "I guess so," she said, cautiously. Madison slowly unwrapped herself from around the girl, and helped them to both stand up. Paige was wearing only a tank top and boxers, so Madison wrapped a blanket from the bed around her shoulders. She led the girl out of the bedroom, noticing her body tense up and her eyes dart around as they entered the hallway outside.

"Nobody is going to touch you," Madison repeated, instinctively putting a steadying hand on Paige's shoulder. She only let go when they reached the door to her office. She unlocked it and let Paige in first, closing the door behind them. She led Paige to the couch and got a pillow and blanket from a cupboard, making up a bed for her. Paige stood there shivering, her arms wrapped around herself. She sat down on the couch when Madison gestured for her to sit.

"Can I let a nurse come in here and clean you up a little?" Madison asked her. Paige's eyes widened in fear and she shook her head. "Can I...can I clean you up a little?" Madison asked. Paige nodded slowly.

Madison took this as a yes, and she put some latex gloves on and took a white washcloth from the towel rack. She ran the washcloth under the tap until it ran warm, twisting the excess water out. She brought the cloth to Paige's cheek, dabbing at the dried blood. She moved carefully, not rubbing too hard. Once the blood was cleaned off the area she saw a more vivid blue bruise underneath. She ran her gloved finger across it and sighed but felt Paige cringe away. She went

to rinse the washcloth off under the tap, watching the blood swirl down the drain as she squeezed the excess water from it.

Paige sat stiffly, not making a sound as Madison cleaned her face. Madison tentatively reached out and held the back of Paige's head as she cleaned her mouth off. She saw her bottom lip was split, and cringed inside. The girl's face was distorted from the swelling, her normally pretty, full lips now raw and puffy. She dabbed lightly, not wanting to hurt her, but the girl didn't seem to notice. Madison finished up, noting a lump on her forehead as well, probably from smacking her head against the door to keep the orderlies out.

She resisted touching the lump, or the girl's face any more than she needed to. She saw how tense she was, how flighty, like a wounded animal, she thought, sadly. At last she was done, and she surveyed her handiwork. Paige didn't have blood caked on her face anymore, but her swollen lips and bruised face still made her ache just looking at it.

"Thanks," Paige said, stiffly, as the doctor washed the cloth out again at the sink. Madison turned and smiled softly. "You're welcome."

"What happened tonight, Paige?" she finally asked.

"I couldn't sleep...I just...had to do...something else...I- wanted to hurt myself, I bit my lip and then I don't know...I just started...punching..." Paige looked down at her hands, with an almost amazed expression. "I didn't mean to, I just...it felt so...good," she said, and looked over at Madison, her eyes shimmering with tears.

Madison sighed, and looked back at Paige with sadness in her own eyes. "I understand," she said, like she meant it.

Madison struggled within herself, feeling the urge to comfort this girl, but she knew she needed to keep her professional distance.

"I have a first aid kit here, I should really clean those," Madison said, reaching for a box on her bookcase. Paige said nothing, but sat still. Madison stuck her head out of the door and asked a nurse for some ice.

She pulled up a chair in front of the girl and ripped open an antibiotic swab. "May I?" she asked, and Paige nodded, her eyes downcast. Madison gingerly swabbed at the split lip and across the scrape on her cheek.

She noticed Paige's hands, which were bloodied. She got the washcloth wet again and proceeded to wash the dried blood from Paige's hands, delicately holding each hand and tenderly scrubbing each finger until they were clean. She saw the knuckles on her right hand were bruised, from where she had been hitting her face. She set her hand down gently and removed her gloves, going to wash her own hands.

Madison went to the door when someone knocked, and took the bag of ice. "Put this on your lip

and your cheek...it should help with the swelling and bruising," she said, and handed the icepack to Paige.

"Try to get some sleep."

Paige settled in, lying down, and held the icepack to her mouth, as she covered herself with a blanket and curled into a ball on her side, facing away from Madison.

"Thanks," Madison heard the soft voice from under the blankets.

"You're welcome, Paige," Madison said, standing and staring at the huddled form for a few long moments before turning to her desk, and paperwork.

She breathed out deeply as she sat, feeling the exhaustion sweep over her. She needed coffee.

Several hours passed and Madison worked on catching up with paperwork. She rubbed at her eyes, which were feeling heavy. If Paige hadn't been using the couch she might very well have gone to lie down, but as it was she just drank coffee and continued working all morning.

She heard a slight noise behind her and glanced over, seeing Paige turn over on the couch. She took a second longer look, surprised at how relaxed Paige looked in sleep. The girl's usual scowl was gone, and her face was peaceful. Her lip was still swollen, but it was going down a little. Madison watched her sleep for several moments before turning back to her files.

"What time is it?" Paige asked, startling Madison who jumped a little at the sound of the voice. In truth, Madison had nodded off a bit. She glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Ten thirty," she said. "How are you feeling?" she asked, smiling at the rumpled looking girl.

"Wow...I slept for 5 hours?" Paige said incredulously. "I haven't slept that long without a nightmare in...forever."

"That's great Paige...I'm really glad you got some sleep," Madison said. She wondered if sleeping in here, in her office had enabled her to sleep better. She was glad that she suggested it.

She watched as Paige reached up and gingerly touched her lips. "Still swollen, huh?" she asked, looking at Madison guiltily.

"A little, but they look much better," Madison assured her. Paige looked down at her feet, the scowl returning to her face once more.

"I'm sorry," she said, quietly. "About last night...and you having to come down here so early..." she said.

Madison rose from her chair and walked over to Paige. She knelt down beside her.

"It's alright Paige. That's what I am here for," she said.

"Are you going to tell my mom?" Paige asked, nervously.

"No...you are a legal adult, Paige, and here on your own free will. I will respect your privacy," Madison explained. "But it might be nice if you talked to her about this, when she comes to visit. It can really help to have someone to confide these things to," she suggested.

Paige snorted in disdain. "My mother won't be coming to visit," she assured Madison. "And even if she did, I have nothing to say to her." Her face became hard and unreadable, but Madison noted the quiver in her chin as she spoke.

"Ah, I see. You two are not on good terms, I take it?" She asked.

"Good terms? No. Considering that she blames me for everything...and threatened to kick me out and take away my college fund after the sleeping pills incident...I don't think so," she said, in a dead, hollow voice.

"Blames you for...everything? Like what, Paige?"

Paige looked up at her briefly, her eyes as unreadable as her face. "Everything," she said. She looked like she was going to continue, but then just shook her head and looked away again. She looked so...lost. So alone.

"Sometimes, the people who love us don't know how to express their concerns or their love very well...maybe I can help you two"-she was cut off as Paige whipped her head up.

"I don't need your help with my mother. I think she was pretty clear about her concerns and her love when she told me it was my fault, that I had it coming...the rape," she glanced up at Madison as if to gauge her reaction.

"That if I hadn't been out walking that late, in that short skirt, it never would have happened. She was more concerned with what her friends might think than with how I was. She just wants it to all go away. I guess that's the one thing we agree on," Paige said, a sarcastic smile twisting her battered lips.

Madison exhaled her breath, feeling the rage simmer inside her. She had to deal with poor parenting all the time, but this was just...unfathomable. That any mother could say such things to their daughter, who had been so brutally attacked, was unthinkable.

"But you know that isn't true, right? About it being your fault..." Madison prompted.

The pained look on Paige's face was enough for Madison to get her answer.

"Yeah, I know. That's what they all tell me," Paige said, chewing on her bottom lip and wincing, feeling the tender, split flesh.

"Can I go back to my room?" Paige asked, standing up and looking around restlessly, obviously anxious to end the conversation.

"Yes, of course," Madison said, standing up. "But I need you to sign some papers for me first." She walked over to her desk and sat, picking up some loose papers.

"Have a seat," she gestured to the chair opposite her desk. Paige wrapped a blanket around herself and sat reluctantly.

"What are these?" she asked, as Madison slid the papers across to her.

"It's a contract," Madison said. "It states that you promise not to injure yourself in any way for the next 24 hours."

Paige stared at the paper, her eyes roaming over the words. "Why?" she asked, looking annoyed.

"Is that going to be a problem, Paige?" Madison asked, carefully. "I need your signature on it, or I can't release you back into the main population," she explained.

"And what if I don't sign it...are you going to keep me locked up in here all day?" Paige asked, angrily.

"No...I'm afraid I couldn't do that even if I wanted to. You would be put in an isolation room, locked in, on suicide watch" she said. "I don't want to do that Paige, but I need to know you won't hurt yourself."

"I could sign it and do it anyway," Paige pointed out.

"Yes, you could. But I have no reason not to trust your word. I haven't given you any reason not to trust mine, have I?" she asked.

Paige frowned and then shook her head no.

"I know how hard it can be when you want to hurt yourself...but there are other ways of dealing with those feelings," Madison said. Paige rolled her eyes.

"There *are* other ways, believe me," Madison repeated, smiling slightly.

"Like what?" Paige asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Well, you have to find other means of expressing yourself, and those feelings. Some people like to do something with their hands...build models, work with clay, draw, write. We have a gym here, you can go and work out...listen to music in the music room," she went on, watching Paige for any sign of encouragement.

Paige didn't say anything, but looked thoughtful.

"I like to draw," she said, quietly.

"Drawing is an excellent way to keep your hands busy and your mind occupied," Madison said. "So...do I have your word? No self injury for the next 24 hours?"

Paige fidgeted with her hands, and after a long silence, spoke.

"Yeah I guess so. 24 hours. What happens after that?" she asked.

"Then we talk again, and I determine if I think you are still at risk of harming yourself," Madison answered. "If I don't, then that's it...if I do...then I will ask for another contract."

Paige nodded. "Ok," she said, grudgingly, and signed the papers in front of her.

"Can I go now?" she asked impatiently.

"Yes, you can go now Paige. Thank you."

Paige stood up, ready to bolt, but turned around at the door.

"See you tomorrow I guess," she said, awkwardly, and Madison took it for what it was...a small gesture...of thanks and understanding.

"See you tomorrow," she agreed, and Paige left the room.

Getting ready to leave for the day, Madison was curious how Paige was doing. She found herself wandering around the young women's unit, looking for the dark haired girl. After searching several rooms, she finally saw her in the music room. The lights were turned out, but the light from the hallway allowed Madison to see her through the glass windows, barely, sitting on the floor against the wall, the headphones covering her ears. She had her arms wrapped around her knees, with her head resting on her knees. Her eyes were closed and Madison wondered if she was sleeping.

A moment later, the blue eyes fluttered open, as if she could sense being watched. Her face hardened for a moment, as if she felt intruded upon, but softened when she recognized Madison.

Her lips, now looking much better, curved into a slow smile. Madison returned the hesitant smile with a bigger one, and she turned and walked away, relieved that at least for now, Paige seemed ok.

"Paige, I was wondering if we could talk about the night of your attack."

Paige glanced up, her face turning stony and cold.

"I don't want to talk about that," she said, her voice quiet.

"Could we talk about the events leading up to it?" Madison asked, sitting across from Paige. "I've read your file and we don't have to go into what happened until you're ready," she added. "But I would like to know what was going on before it happened."

Paige nodded, her fingers playing with the loose threads of her ripped jeans. Madison noted that her face looked much better today, the lips back to their normal size, just a small cut on the bottom lip, and the bruises fading on her face.

"I was at a friend's house, at a party," she said, in a bored tone. "She only lives about a mile from the dorm so I walked home after."

"Alone?" Madison asked.

"Yeah, alone," Paige replied, defensively.

"Did you notice anyone leave the party at the same time you did...possibly any of the attackers?"

"No...I left earlier than most of them. Nobody was following me," Paige said, a little impatiently. She had already repeated this story many times.

"And...you didn't recognize any of the attackers...no ex-boyfriends, or..." Madison trailed off.

"No," Paige said, her voice hard. "I didn't recognize any of them. And I don't have any ex-boyfriends," she added.

Madison looked surprised, Paige was obviously attractive and at her age she was shocked that the girl hadn't had a boyfriend yet.

"I don't... *do* boys, doctor," she added, and grinned impishly.

Madison recovered quickly and smiled. It was one of the first real smiles she had seen on Paige, and her whole face lit up.

"Ah, I see. So you're gay? Well, that rules out the angry ex-boyfriend theory then," she said.

"Pretty much, yep." Paige said, looking amused, as though she was getting a kick out of seeing Madison unsettled.

"Have you...I mean do your parents know..." Madison asked, trying to find the right words.

"That I'm a lesbian? No way...they would flip out. Like it isn't bad enough I dress the way I do, hang out with the friends I do, and have the audacity to get raped."

Madison nodded, the layers of mystery slowly being unfolded before her eyes. There was a lot about Paige she didn't know, she realized. Every time she said the word "raped" Madison felt a stab of pain, but she tried not to show it.

"It's not a problem, is it?" Paige suddenly asked, almost defensively.

"What, that you're gay?" Madison asked, shocked. "No...of course not, Paige. Not for me. I just wonder if you could get more support from your family if they knew."

She couldn't help but be surprised by this latest confession...it never occurred to her Paige might be gay. She had worked with a number of gay and lesbian patients though, and it didn't bother her. It made the rape somehow all that more horrendous to her now that she knew this, though.

"Like I said, my family is the last place I would turn for support. Especially about something like...that." Paige said, firmly.

"I understand," Madison said, giving up on the family angle. "Do you have a girlfriend, Paige?" she asked, thinking this could be an important part in her recovery.

Paige's face fell.

"No...I was seeing a girl before...but...that didn't last," she answered, her voice sounding hollow.

"Ok," Madison said, checking that off her mental list of support systems for the girl. Her choices were rapidly narrowing.

"She couldn't deal with it," Paige offered up, spontaneously. "The rape. Afterwards." She added.

"That must have been painful for you," Madison said, gently. "Sometimes people don't know how to respond to situations like that."

"I guess so," Paige said. "She didn't understand. How hard it was for me...to do things, after," she struggled to get the words out, but Madison caught on quickly.

"You mean to be intimate, afterwards?" she asked. Paige nodded.

"It isn't unusual for anyone who has been through what you have to have issues with intimacy after a case like this...but it is often hard on their partner, too," she added, trying to be fair to what was probably a teenager who had no clue what damage she had done to Paige. Inside though she wanted to slap this girl, whoever she was.

"There is nothing wrong with having those feelings and reactions. You can...heal in those ways too, you know," she said, gently.

Paige simply nodded again, and Madison ached for the girl. She had been hurt and rejected on all sides, it seemed.

"Do you want to tell me about that? The trouble with intimacy?"

Paige shrugged. "I don't know. I just didn't want anyone touching me, and she couldn't deal with it. We weren't serious, it's not a big deal."

"It can be difficult to trust someone else after what you've experienced," Madison said. "In time, with the right person, you can slowly build that trust back."

Paige scrunched her face up, looking doubtful.

"I don't really have any interest in that," Paige said, looking uncomfortable.

Madison bit her lip, deciding not to push the matter any further today.

"I hope someday you will feel differently, Paige. Love and human affection are an important part of life." As soon as she said it Madison felt hypocritical. She hardly embraced this philosophy herself, and she hadn't even been through what Paige had.

"How's it going with the contract?" Madison asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"Fine...I haven't broken my word. Unless you count smiling...every time I do my lip cracks open and bleeds," she said with a crooked grin and then a grimace. Madison chuckled. It was good to see her smile.

"No, I won't count smiling against you. Do you think we need another contract or..."

"Or am I going to behave?" Paige asked, leaning back in her chair and raising her eyebrow. "I'll behave."

Madison smiled. "Good...I'm glad to hear it. How's your sleep going?" she asked.

Paige shrugged. "I got a few hours last night before the dreams woke me up."

"Paige, if you need more sleep...you're always welcome to nap in here during the day if I don't

have any patients. I normally just have appointments in the late afternoons, so...feel free." She said to Paige, who nodded slowly.

"Thanks, maybe I will, sometime." Paige stood up to leave, but Madison told her to wait.

"I have something for you," she said, rummaging through her desk. She pulled out a bag and handed it to Paige. Paige looked inside and took out a sketchbook, and a set of charcoal pencils, and an eraser. The sketchbook looked like good quality paper, with a hard black cover.

"I thought you might want to draw sometimes, it can be a really good outlet for your emotions," Madison said, secretly pleased at the surprised look on Paige's face. "Sometimes we can express feelings on paper or through art that we can't find words for," she added, gently.

Paige looked up at her, still looking stunned.

"Thank you," she said, rewarding Madison with another brief genuine smile.

"You're very welcome Paige. I'll see you Thursday."

Later that night in bed, Paige felt a warm tingle go through her as she stroked the fine quality paper. She tried to ignore it but she was pleased by the gesture...she couldn't deny it. It felt good to know that someone cared about her enough to think of something like this. She wasn't used to it.

She sat down on her bed and chewed on the end of a pencil until she realized she was getting charcoal in her mouth. She could only think of one thing she wanted to draw, so finally she set the pencil tip to the paper and began to sketch.

Even in black and white, it was apparent whose warm, soulful eyes she was drawing.

"Paige, can you tell me a little about your nightmares?" Madison asked, during their next therapy session.

Paige tensed up in her chair.

"Why?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Have you heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?" asked Madison, her notebook in her hand and pencil in her mouth.

"Isn't that what soldiers get when they come back from the war?" Paige asked.

"Well yes, they certainly can. But it can happen to anyone who goes through a traumatic experience. Like you. You are experiencing the symptoms of PTSD."

Paige looked surprised. "There's a name for this? Other than crazy?" she laughed, and Madison smiled.

"Yes, there's a name for it and it isn't crazy. People who have PTSD often have recurring nightmares about their experiences and have a difficult time sleeping. Sometimes they have flashbacks of the incident, anxiety, issues with trust and intimacy, angry outbursts...urges to hurt themselves," Madison went on, glancing at Paige to gauge her reaction.

"Really?" Paige asked, looking almost...hopeful. "Is there a cure for it?" she asked.

"There has been lots of research on it and yes, there is treatment for it. Part of that treatment can be medication, but also therapy, like what we're doing."

Paige looked up. "I don't want to take medication," she said.

"Well, we don't have to decide that right now, if you're not ready. We can focus on therapy and talk about medication more later. I can give you all the options and information and you can decide. Usually it's only taken for a short time, Paige, just to help with some of the symptoms like sleep and anxiety."

Paige chewed on her bottom lip. "Ok," she said finally.

"Can you tell me a little about your dreams, Paige?" Madison asked gently. Paige looked distressed. She took a deep breath.

"They're always the same, basically. I dream about what happened that night, only it's like I'm not inside my body, I'm watching from outside. I see what's happening, what they're doing to me. But I can't move or speak or stop them. I see them holding me down, kicking me. I hear them say things to me," she paused, her eyes glued to her hands as she spoke.

"I don't know if it's what really happened or not," she finished.

"Do you remember what happened that night?" Madison asked, sitting up a little in her chair.

"I had a concussion and...some if it is fuzzy. I think there are parts I...can't remember," she said,

her voice trembling. "But I know my dream ends different than what really happened," she said, her hand flitting unconsciously to her throat.

"Why...how does your dream always end?" Madison asked.

There was a long silence, and Madison waited, patiently.

"They...cut my throat open, and I can't breathe, can't scream," she said in almost a whisper, closing her eyes, her face twisted in pain as if she was seeing it right this second. "When I wake up I feel it...like it just happened."

"The knife, you mean?" Madison asked.

"Yes. No. All of it," Paige said. "I hurt all over...inside and...I can't breathe, at first..."

Madison let out the breath she was holding. "I see...that must be a really scary way to wake up," she said. "But they didn't cut your throat like that, did they. You're alive and you are here," she said, reaffirming it to herself as well as Paige, glancing at the scar on her throat.

Paige opened her eyes. "The only reason they didn't cut my throat that badly is because I did what they told me to," she choked out painfully, her face twisted in self-hatred and disgust.

"You did what you had to do, to survive. Nobody would ever blame you for doing that, Paige. You were fighting for your life, and you succeeded. You are here, alive, and you are going to go on to lead a beautiful life, despite what they did to you."

"Yeah," Paige said, not sounding convinced.

"Paige, just because you did what they told you, doesn't make it your fault...you did nothing wrong. You had no choice. They are the ones who chose to do that, not you. You had two options, do what they told you, or die. You chose life!" Madison said, pleading silently to see a glimmer of recognition in Paige.

Paige finally looked up at her, her eyes looking old and tired. "Yeah...I guess I did."

"Yes, you did. I am glad you chose life, Paige," Madison said, fervently.

Paige didn't respond.

"What about afterwards, what happened then? Did you go to the hospital?"

"Yeah, I guess someone saw me lying on the ground in the park and called the police. I don't remember any of that," she said. "I just woke up in the hospital the next day. I didn't know what was going on. I was in a lot of pain," she added. "I think I was on pain medication. Then I started remembering bits and pieces of the night before. I remember asking a nurse about AIDS and pregnancy...I was so worried about that. They tested me for all of that stuff. Then the police

came and talked to me and I told them what I could remember. I don't think I helped them much. It was so dark outside."

Madison nodded, jotting down notes. "And what happened with the tests they did, for STD's and pregnancy?" she asked.

"They all came back negative," Paige said. Madison breathed a sigh of relief. Thank god for small favors.

"That's good," Madison said, and Paige nodded in agreement. "How long were you in the hospital? Did your parents come?" she asked.

"I was there for about 5 days. My mom came once, the first day. She freaked out when she saw me, she just kept saying that they had disfigured me and how hideous I looked," Paige said, bitterness lacing her words.

"I guess I looked bad. But...the things that hurt the worst weren't even visible...she never even asked how...I felt," she said, quietly.

Madison's hands gripped the arms of her chair, wanting to go to her, comfort her, but she steadied herself before she responded.

"That must have hurt you," she said, simply.

Paige shrugged.

"I didn't really expect anything else from her," she said. Madison could hardly comprehend that a mother would treat her child so callously, and she fought the anger that coursed through her at this woman. She tried to remain objective.

"You have the right to expect love and compassion from your family," Madison said. "But more important, you have the right to be angry, and to be sad, and ultimately to love yourself. You might not feel like it right now, but you are strong, I have seen it in you, Paige. You can take back the control those men took from you, and you can use it to make yourself stronger."

"I don't feel very strong sometimes," Paige said.

"And that's ok too. You don't have to be strong all the time." Madison said, knowing it was equally important to give her permission to not be ok, that she could fall apart and be safe, be cared for.

"Thank you," Paige said.

"Does that taste as bad as it looks?" Paige heard a voice above her as she sat in the cafeteria trying to choke down a mysterious looking soup.

She looked up and saw Madison standing there holding a tray.

"Not really. I just wish I knew what was in it," she said, looking down into the cup suspiciously.

"Mind if I join you?" Madison asked, and Paige shook her head no. Madison slid onto the bench next to her.

"I forgot to bring my lunch from home, so it looks like I am in the same boat," she said, eyeing the soup disdainfully.

"I'm so sorry you are being forced to eat like the rest of us wretches," Paige grinned.

"Well, I feel it's important to experience this place the way the rest of you do, to fully appreciate it," Madison joked. "I just wish that didn't include eating the food."

Paige laughed, and Madison wondered if it was the first time she had heard her laugh. It was nice to hear.

"I suppose you bring delicious home cooked delicacies to work everyday?" Paige asked her. "Other than today, of course."

"Not really...I hardly ever cook. It doesn't seem worth the bother just for myself. But still, I can slap together a sandwich and at least know what's in it," she smirked, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

"How'd you sleep last night?" Madison asked, taking a tentative sip of her soup and grimacing.

Paige shrugged. "The usual. I woke up around three a.m. and...well I don't usually even try to go back to sleep. It's not exactly appealing."

Madison nodded in understanding. "What do you do all night then?" she asked.

"I usually go into the bathroom so I can turn on the light without disturbing Cathy. I...I've been drawing," she added, looking embarrassed.

"That's great, Paige! I'm so glad you're using it. Do you think it's helpful at all?"

"Yes, it's helpful, I guess," she said, a blush rising to her face.

Madison smiled at this, finding it endearing. "You don't have to show me, but if you ever want to I'd be happy to see your drawings," she said.

"I'll keep that in mind," Paige said, suddenly showing great interest in her soup as she swallowed the last of it.

"I had something different in mind for today," Madison said as Paige settled into her usual chair for their session, curling her legs up underneath her. She looked more relaxed today, at ease with her. It was good to see.

"Like what?" Paige asked.

"It's called guided relaxation, or guided imagery," Madison explained. "It's a really great way to relax and help heal yourself, without medication. Would you like to try it?"

Paige made a face and looked skeptical.

"What do I have to do?" she asked.

"Well, you just lie down and relax your body, and I will talk you through it...its absolutely painless," Madison said, reassuringly. "And if you want to stop at any point, you can."

"It's not like...hypnosis or anything is it?" Paige asked.

"No, although you can go so deep into the relaxation that it can be similar. But you will always be aware of yourself on some level, and if it brings up any bad memories or imagery, like I said, we can stop anytime. And I will be right here."

Paige looked at her, and finding the encouraging look in Madison's eyes, finally nodded. "Ok," she said. "I guess I'll try it."

"Great. Why don't you go lie down on the couch and get comfortable. I'm going to tell Trish not to disturb us." Madison said.

She came back into the office a moment later and saw that Paige was stretched out on the couch, her arms folded over her chest. She looked so solemn, Madison couldn't help smile to herself. She turned the lights off, the sunlight coming through the windows still providing some light in the room, and she put a CD in her stereo. Soft music came on, with the sound of waves softly washing over the shore. She went over to the couch and sat on the floor beside it.

"Alright now, Paige. Are you comfortable? Do you need a blanket or pillow?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Paige said, still looking nervous.

"Ok. I want you to close your eyes, slowly, and feel the support of the couch holding your body weight. Just become aware of the support beneath you, and take a few slow deep breaths." Madison said, taking a few deep breaths herself to relax. She heard Paige breathe out.

"Take a few more deep breaths and exhale. Good," Madison said, making her voice soft and soothing.

"Any noises you hear, from inside or outside the room, any thoughts or feelings you have, I want you to acknowledge them, in a passive way, as if you are watching from somewhere else. Then let them move to the background, as if you are walking away, and let them go with a breath, as if you were releasing a balloon into the sky."

She paused and let her words soak into Paige's mind, hearing her breathe out again. Madison resisted the urge to look at her, keeping her eyes focused on the sculpture on the small table nearby.

"With your next breath, I want you to imagine following that breath inside you, imagine then that it flows all the way down your body, to your feet. The oxygen is flowing to every part of your body, breathing life into each cell. Now, with your next breath out, any pain, sadness, anger, or any other sensation you don't like, I want you to feel these leave your body as you exhale, flowing away from you, like a river carries a leaf downstream and far away." Madison paused and let the gentle sounds of water fill the room, as she listened to Paige breathing out again.

"Now, as you take another relaxing breath, imagine the air you breathe in is warm, healing, loving. It fills you up, expanding inside you and traveling to every part of your body. Feel the warm air move to any areas of pain you feel, and now, as you exhale, gather them up, and breathe them out, letting go."

She heard a shuddering breath and glanced up, to make sure Paige was doing alright. Her eyes were closed, her face calm. She looked so trusting, and Madison felt a tug of sudden affection in her heart. She began speaking again, her voice calm and tranquil.

"As you begin to feel your body release this pain, with each breath, I want you to use your imagination, and imagine a place. It can be a place inside, or outside, a place where you feel safe, and that makes you feel good. It can be a real or an imaginary place. It doesn't matter where you choose to go, just to feel safe, good, and peaceful. The place will become vivid and real to you, as you take in the scenery around you, the colors, smells, textures.

Notice the sounds of this place, noticing any scents in the air, feeling the air on your skin, maybe breezy, cool, or soft and warm. Think about the way you this place makes you feel, and think of this place as your own private place, a safe place you can come back to whenever you want.

Allow it soak down into you, all the way through your skin, into muscle and bone, to each and every cell in your body."

Madison fell silent, and allowed her soothing voice to hang in the air, giving Paige time to open herself up and accept all of it.

"Allow this safe feeling to settle into your body, the warm, loving, peaceful feelings filling you up. Allow it to comfort and soothe you, and breathe out again, slowly."

Madison's eyes flickered back over to Paige, trying to gauge how she was feeling. She still looked calm, and even had a slight smile on her face.

"You feel lighter now, as you breathe easily, in and out, slowly. Remember that you can return here anytime, with your breath. I want you to carry this peaceful feeling with you, throughout the day, remembering the way you feel right now. Now I want you to slowly become more aware of your surroundings, here in this room, in your own time. There's no hurry, just allow your body to remember where you are with each breath. You are coming back to the room, gently, and slowly, with every breath."

Madison paused, waiting a minute or two, giving Paige time to reconnect with the surroundings.

"When you're ready, Paige, I want you to open your eyes slowly, take one more deep, cleansing breath, and prepare yourself to return to this room, right now, with me." Madison finished, feeling relaxed and tranquil herself as she glanced up at Paige, seeing her eyes flutter open.

Madison sat, her arms wrapped around her bent knees, not moving or speaking, not wanting to jar Paige out of her relaxed state. The music was still playing softly in the background. Paige stirred a little, and turned her head to find Madison.

"Doc?" she asked.

"I'm right here, Paige," Madison smiled at the new nickname and knelt up, looking down at her. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Incredible," Paige whispered. Her face looked so serene, so relaxed.

"Thank you," Paige said, softly. She reached out hesitantly to hug Madison. Surprised but secretly pleased, Madison returned her hug, tenderly, noting what a huge step it was for Paige to reach out to her like this, to anyone, physically. It was a little breakthrough.

"You are very welcome. Did you feel relaxed?" Madison asked, breaking away from the hug.

"Yes...I felt like I was floating, flying, almost outside of my body. It was really nice," Paige said, smiling.

"I'm glad you liked it," Madison said. "It can be pretty powerful," she added. "If you want to

keep it up, you can learn to relax yourself that way too, in time. There are recordings I can give you as well, to listen to, to guide you through it, but I don't want you trying it on your own just yet. Just in case you need...someone. I'd rather be here when you go deep like that," Madison explained, worried about what feelings might come up for her later on.

Paige looked at her, thoughtfully. "Did you make the recordings?" she asked.

Madison shook her head. "No...I'm not very good at it. I meant professional meditation tapes."

"Oh," Paige said, sounding disappointed. "I don't know...I wanted it to be your voice. I think you were great at it," she said. "Not that I really have any comparison," she added.

"Well, thanks for your confidence," Madison said, smiling. "Do you feel like you can sit up now? You should probably be going to dinner soon."

Paige sat up slowly, stretching. "I just want to stay here and sleep," she said, wistfully. Madison laughed sympathetically.

"Maybe tonight you could think about your safe place, and focus on that, to help you sleep." She suggested. "Were you able to imagine a nice safe place, Paige?"

Paige nodded. "Yes, I did."

"I'm glad." Madison said, smiling.

Early Friday morning, Paige shuffled over to Madison's office. She knocked on the door hesitantly.

"Come in," Madison called out, not looking up from the computer.

"Hey Doc," Paige said, sticking her head in. Madison looked up and saw her, looking pale and baggy eyed, her hair still ruffled from sleep.

"Paige, hi," she said, looking a bit surprised to see her here at this hour. "Come in." Paige walked in and closed the door. She looked nervous, fidgeting with her hands.

"What's up?" Madison asked.

"I was just wondering...I mean, you look busy though," Paige mumbled. She was wearing socks and no shoes. "I didn't sleep much, last night, with the dreams...and you said I could sleep in here

sometime," she paused, looking uncertain.

Madison stood up and walked over to her. "Of course you can, Paige. I'm sorry you had a bad night," she added, softly, rubbing the girl's arm sympathetically.

Paige looked up at her shyly and gave her a grateful look. She walked over to the couch and lay down, covering herself. She felt safe, and fell asleep almost instantly to the soft clicking sounds of the computer.

At ten thirty Madison woke Paige up gently, reminding her she had group. Paige groaned.

"Oh god...do I have to?" she mumbled, grumpily.

"I'm afraid so," Madison said, and watched in amusement as Paige sat up, her hair looking even more crazy than it had before.

"I guess I better go clean up. Thanks, Doc," Paige said, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

"Anytime," Madison said.

It came as a bit of a shock when Paige entered the group therapy session -late- to find Madison sitting where Dr. Forbes usually sat.

"I see you've decided to join us, Paige," Madison said with a slight twitch of a smile.

Paige bit her lip looking embarrassed. "Sorry I'm late," she said, hastily sitting down.

"That's ok, we were just discussing the merits of group session, and having the support of others," Madison said, looking around the room.

"Let's go around the room and state something new we've learned about ourselves this week," Madison said. "Any volunteers?"

Josie raised her hand and started talking about setting boundaries. Cathy talked next about respecting her body. Kristin mentioned the importance of the support of her family.

The more they talked, the more Paige shut down. She had nothing in common with these other women. They had no idea what she had been through, what she felt. She withdrew further and further inside, closing them all out.

When they got to Paige, she said nothing, leaving the group hanging in silence.

"Do you want to share anything, Paige?" Madison prompted gently.

"I have nothing to say." She said, almost inaudibly.

"I don't see why she's even here," Kris mumbled. "She never talks in group unless it's to yell at Dr. Forbes. Unless you count talking in her sleep."

Madison looked reproachfully at Kris and then back to Paige. "I think it might be helpful if you shared something with the group...they trusted you enough to talk about themselves," Madison pointed out. Paige looked up, her eyes flashing in anger.

"You want me to share with the group? Fine. I'll "share" with the group. You want to know what I learned about myself this week? That I am a fucking freak. You're all talking about it behind my back anyway right? Yeah, that's right, I'm the girl who smashes her own face in and has nightmares every night. I'm the girl who doesn't have any family or friends on visiting day. I'm the girl who was held down and raped by three guys and left for dead. This scar on my throat that you all can't seem to stop staring at? That's from the knife they held to my throat while they took turns raping me before they beat the crap out of me and left me for dead. My ex-girlfriend dumped me because I wouldn't let her touch me anymore afterwards. She just "couldn't deal" with it. Can you all help me with that because you know, frankly, it does bother me a little bit. Is that enough or should I continue sharing, Dr. Nichols?" she finished, in a scathing voice.

The girls all looked terrified, and Madison had gone pale. "Paige," she said.

Paige stood up. "I thought so. I don't need this Bullshit. I'm outta here." She said, and stood up so abruptly that her chair fell over. She stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Madison dismissed group after calming the other girls down somewhat. She needed to find Paige. She had a sick feeling in her gut that wouldn't go away. She heard the painful words Paige had yelled to the group ring in her ears over and over again. She walked down the hall and went to Paige's room, which was empty. Trish, the nurse, saw her scanning the hallway and came up to her.

"Are you looking for Paige? She went into the gym." She offered sympathetically.

"Thanks, Trish," Madison said, breathing a sigh of relief. She walked down to the gym, pondering what she could even say to the girl. As she looked through the glass panes of the window into the gym, she saw her. She was alone in the gym, hitting the punching bag, pummeling it repeatedly, as hard as she could, from the looks of it. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she had stripped off her sweatshirt, wearing only a grey tank top and jeans.

Even through the heavy doors, Madison could hear the loud grunts and screams as she attacked the punching bag like she was out for blood. She slowly opened the door, and walked inside.

Paige didn't look up or seem to hear her, and continued the barrage on the punching bag, slamming her fists into it every time it swung back to her, screaming each time her fist made impact. She finally whirled around, panting loudly, the sweat pouring down her face, her skin glistening with the effort.

She saw Madison standing there, and ran her hand across her forehead, wiping away the sweat that poured into her eyes. She stood still, gasping for breath. Madison took a few steps toward her. Paige didn't look like she was going to run, so Madison continued to walk towards her, slowly.

Their eyes met and Madison was once again struck by the intensity of the blue eyes, as she searched for some glimmer of understanding. She saw anger, pain, and frustration. Sadness. Did Paige want to hit her like she was that punching bag? She came within a few feet of Paige, whose chest was heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Madison couldn't seem to find any words, and so just stood there, their eyes still locked together.

Paige moved suddenly, making Madison jump back a step. She felt her heart hammer in her chest as Paige moved in quickly to close the gap between them. Madison was afraid...but she wasn't sure of what. She saw the tension, felt it, radiating off Paige, saw the cords in her neck standing out, taut. She wondered briefly if she was about to get punched in the face.

Paige was so close now that Madison could see the light freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose, the flecks of gold around the brilliant blue of her eyes. Madison opened her mouth to speak.

"Paige."

In an instant, Paige moved closer, pressing her lips to Madison's, in a bruising, angry kiss, her hands moving up to grab Madison's face as she pulled her harder into her.

Madison felt the room spin and her world turn upside down as she felt the searing heat emanating from Paige's mouth. She felt herself respond, thoughtlessly, helplessly, moving her lips against Paige's, opening her lips and allowing the girl's insistent tongue to enter her mouth.

It was only her own moan that moved up from her chest and erupted from her mouth that startled Madison into pulling away.

Paige drew back too, taking a step back, her face blank with shock as she slowly realized what she had done. She saw Madison raise her hand and flinched fearfully as if she expected a slap in the face, but she wasn't prepared for what Madison did.

Her hand trembling, she reached out and touched Paige's face, a soft stroke across her still bruised cheek. Paige's eyes closed tightly and tears streamed out, she was so stunned by this unexpected gentle caress.

She turned to hide her face, but Madison reached out and gently grabbed her arm, swinging her

back to face her. She pulled Paige to her and held her in her arms. Paige stood there stiffly, and then finally melted into the embrace. She wrapped her arms around Madison, holding on tightly, and laid her head on her shoulder.

Madison held her close, stroking her hair softly.

"Paige," she whispered, not sure what to say. Her heart was still thundering in her chest.

"I'm sorry," Paige cried quietly. She began to sob, letting out some of the pain she had been holding in for so long.

"Sweetie, it will be ok...everything will be ok," Madison whispered, so many conflicting emotions coursing through her that she didn't know what else to say. She held her and let her cry, until the sobs began to fade.

"Do you want to come to my office and talk?" she asked, finally. Paige lifted her head, sniffing. She nodded.

They walked slowly out of the gym, Paige picking up her sweatshirt off the floor and using it to wipe the sweat from her face and neck before tying it around her waist.

She walked ahead of Madison as they exited the gym, and Madison pressed her hand to her mouth, trying to compose herself. *Oh my god, what the hell just happened? She just kissed me and...did I...kiss her back?*

Her mind was spinning with a multitude of thoughts, mostly about how they had just broken every policy the hospital had about Doctor/patient ethics...but it didn't erase the burning sensation of those lips pressed against hers, or the way it made her feel inside.

God, this is bad Madison groaned inwardly, as they reached her office door.

"Paige," Madison said, calmly, "You do realize this can't happen again," She said, a few minutes later after she and Paige had settled in some chairs in her office. She handed Paige a bottle of water and she gratefully accepted it, twisting off the top and taking a long drink. Madison caught herself watching her, and then looked away, suddenly paranoid.

Get a grip, Madison! She chided herself.

"Yes...I do realize that," Paige said. "I'm sorry...it won't happen again...I'm not sure what happened." Paige said, and she was sincere about that. She looked just as shaken by it as Madison was.

Madison cleared her throat nervously. "Sometimes when emotions get really intense...these things happen," She explained, as if it made perfect sense. As if it happened every day. She

couldn't recall any patient ever responding that way to her before. Paige just looked at her, her eyes looking doubtful, but she didn't say a word.

"But as I'm sure you understand, I am your doctor and you are a patient here. It's completely inappropriate to...have things like that happen," she struggled to get the words out, feeling mortified. "I could get into serious trouble and...it just isn't right, Paige. We can continue with your treatment," Madison went on. "Or I can transfer your case to Dr. Forbes if you'd be more comfortable..." she paused here, knowing how well Paige got along with the young intern.

"Please...don't punish me Doc...I promise, I will behave," Paige pleaded. Madison thought it over. She was reluctant to give Paige up as a patient. She wanted to oversee her care herself. She was making real progress now, and she just wanted to help her.

"Ok then. Let's talk about what happened in group then, shall we?"

Paige groaned. "Oh god...ok...if we must."

"You know, you made a really good choice today, Paige," Madison said.

"I did?" Paige asked, looking confused.

"Yes, you did. I mean, in the gym," Madison said, and then hurried to clarify, remembering the kiss in the gym and feeling the heat rush to her face. "You chose to take your anger out on the punching bag and not yourself," she pointed out.

Paige nodded, looking thoughtful. "I guess so," she finally said.

"Well I think it's a great step in the right direction," Madison said, smiling. "You know, some of those girls felt really bad after you left. They all ganged up on Kris," Madison told her. "I think that if you give them a chance you'll find more in common with them than you might imagine," she added, gently.

Paige frowned, but didn't respond. "They don't understand," she finally said.

"Maybe not about everything, but there are still things you can learn from each other. Just give it a chance, open yourself up to it," Madison pleaded.

Paige sighed. "Ok, I'll try."

"I'm sorry I lost it in there," Paige added. "And...about the gym," she added, hiding her face in her hands.

Madison, still reeling from the events, laughed shakily.

"It's ok, Paige...we can just move on from here. Move forward, right?" she asked, trying to sound confident.

"Yeah," Paige said. "Ok."

"I have some work to catch up on. I'll see you for our appointment on Tuesday," Madison said, grateful that the weekend was here. She needed to get away from here, needed time to think.

"Alright. See ya doc," Paige said, and left the office.

Saturday night was girl's night out for Madison and Julia. Todd was abandoned to watch football at home, and the girls hit the town.

"God Julia, you have no idea how badly I need this," Madison said as they walked into the bar.

"Rough day at work?" Julia quipped, grinning.

"Again, you have no idea," Madison repeated, rolling her eyes. They found a table and sat down.

The bartender came up and took their orders.

"I'll have a strawberry margarita with a double shot of Cuervo," Madison said. Julia looked at her shocked.

"You lush! You never drink anything but wine and beer. It must be bad." She laughed. Madison swallowed.

"Julia...I know I don't usually talk much about work but this case is...well it's really getting to me." Madison admitted, after taking a few deep sips of her margarita.

"What's going on?" Julia asked, her eyes worried. She had never seen Madison look this affected by work, not even when she was slaving away doing 24 hour shifts before she became head of her department.

"It's this...girl," Madison said, haltingly.

"The one you were talking about last week?" Julia asked. "Has she warmed up to you at all yet?"

"Yes...she is warming up to me...you could say," Madison said, studying her drink closely and turning bright red.

"Oh my god...she likes you doesn't she?" Julia cried, clapping her hand over her mouth. "That is so cute...she has a doctor crush." She giggled.

"It's not like that," Madison said, defensively. "And it's NOT cute. She...kissed me," she said, looking up at her friend, her eyes agonized.

"Shit, Maddie...that's not good is it," Julia gasped.

"No, it's not good."

"What did you do?" Julia asked breathlessly.

I kissed her back! Madison's mind screamed.

"Nothing! I mean we talked about it and I told her it couldn't happen again. She seemed every bit as shocked as I was," she explained, recalling the horrified look on Paige's face.

"Oh...well, that's good," Julia said, sipping her beer. "But is this going to cause trouble for you? I mean, kissing a patient is against hospital policy, right?"

Madison cringed. "Of course it is! But I didn't kiss her, she kissed me and...I don't think it will be a problem. She won't do it again and I wouldn't let her," she said, firmly. "I wouldn't do anything to risk my job."

"I know," Julia said. "That is just crazy Maddie...and a girl! Wow." She said, stunned.

"Well she is an adult," Madison said, again feeling defensive. "But yeah...it was...crazy," she said, feeling the heat creep over her face again at the recollection.

"Are you going to keep working with her?" Julia asked after a long silence, both women absorbed in their drinks and their own thoughts.

"Yes I am. She is finally making some progress and I don't want to interrupt that," Madison said. She defended her decision in her own mind, even though Julia accepted it with ease. She knew it was probably egotistical but she didn't feel like anyone else could help Paige the way she could. They had a bond and she didn't think anyone else could reach her like she had. She wanted to help her so badly.

"Well...let's get ridiculously drunk and forget all about patients hitting on their doctors for tonight," Julia grinned at her, and raised her beer. Madison smiled and raised her glass and they did a cheer.

"To girl's night!" Julia said.

"To girl's night."

Saturday wasn't nearly as much fun for Paige. She watched as parents and friends and lovers came to visit the other patients, and finally, admitting that no one was coming to see her, she went to the gym to work out.

She felt her stomach flutter as she entered the room, just seeing the punching bag brought a flood of embarrassment to her. She couldn't believe she had kissed Dr. Nichols! She tried to put it out of her mind as she began jabbing at the bag, warming up, but she couldn't stop thinking about it. She let her mind wander back to that moment. She didn't know what she had been thinking, it wasn't really a thought at all. More like...a feeling. An urge.

And...Dr. Nichols had responded, she remembered with a slight grin...she hadn't pulled away in horror. Well, she had, but...not before she kissed her back. Paige punched the bag harder. She recalled the way her lips felt against hers...the way she had moaned into her mouth before she pulled away. She shook her head, dismissing it as a natural reaction. *She's my doctor...she doesn't feel anything more for me than that*, she drilled into her head with each punch.

She felt mixed emotions when she thought about Dr. Nichols. She had never felt as safe as she did when she was with her. She felt protected and warm. *She is beautiful*, she thought, with a quick right jab to the punching bag. *And her body is...very nice*, she added, with a left jab. *And her smile...and those eyes*. Punch. Punch.

And she's your doctor, and not interested in you, you're just a messed up kid to her, what the hell are you even thinking? She cried out in her mind, berating herself. She hit the bag harder and harder, venting all her confusion, frustration and anger out on it. She was beating up the bag instead of herself, but on the inside, she was hurting too.

Late that night, Paige sat up in the bathroom, shaking and sweaty, chasing yet another nightmare away. She got out her sketchpad and began to draw, losing herself in the tiny lines and shading as she drowned out the images in her head.

Madison knew that the Randall's had not been to visit their daughter since she had checked into Palo Alto over two weeks ago. She asked Paige if she could call them in for a family therapy session, and Paige reluctantly agreed.

"But they probably won't come," she had warned Madison.

She left several messages for them and finally got a call back from Mrs. Randall, three days later. Madison asked her if they would visit the hospital for a family session with Paige, and though it took some effort and convincing, Mrs. Randall finally said yes.

When Paige arrived for her appointment with Dr. Nichols, her parents were waiting in the lobby. Madison was just walking out to greet them when she saw Paige walk up to them. She couldn't help notice the stiff hug her mother gave her, and the curt nod from her father.

"Mr. and Mrs. Randall, I'm Madison Nichols, it's so nice to finally meet you," Madison said, stepping forward, not being able to resist putting an emphasis on *finally*. She shook hands with them both, sensing great hostility from the mother, and outright disinterest from the father.

"Hi, Paige," she smiled warmly, trying to compensate for the chilly atmosphere. "Let's all come sit down in my office, shall we?" Madison said, leading the way.

She found it amusing when Paige chose the chair nearest to hers, and her parents sat as far away from the desk as they possibly could.

"I'm glad you could make it to the family session," Madison began brightly, trying to infuse the room with positive vibes. "It's so important for Paige to have the support of her family. I can see that you care about her very much, wanting her to get the help she needs here," she went on. The father looked around uncomfortably. The mother gazed back at Madison with icy blue eyes...similar and yet so different from Paige's. Her hair was short and dyed blonde- badly dyed, from the looks of the roots showing.

"I'm not even sure why we're here, I don't see any improvement in her at all," Mrs. Randall sneered, looking at Paige with distaste.

"You've been doing it again, haven't you?" Mrs. Randall snapped at Paige. "Hurting yourself, cutting yourself? I can see those bruises. I thought you people were here to protect her from that kind of thing, isn't that why she's here? Can't you control your patients, Dr...Nichols?" she asked, glancing at the diploma on the wall to remind her of the name.

Madison took a deep breath, steadying herself.

"I assure you, Mrs. Randall, Paige is making great progress. She had one incident over a week ago, and she was never in any real danger." She said, feeling a pang of guilt over Paige's injuries. "Paige has been making great headway into her treatment, and there's a lot more to it than simply stopping the self injury," Madison went on. Mrs. Randall interrupted her.

"Well if you are so sure of your program, why do you need to drag us down here? I don't see how we can help, if we could we wouldn't need to send her to a place like this!" she muttered.

Madison saw Paige shrink smaller and smaller in her seat, and she fought back the anger that wanted to come roaring out.

"Mrs. Randall, your daughter has been through a horrendous ordeal," Madison said, "She needs you to be a part of this process, and when she goes back home, it really helps if we all work together, with Paige, to do what is best for her," Madison said in a low, steady voice.

Mrs. Randall huffed and fidgeted with her purse. "Well to be honest Doctor, I'm not sure what else I can do. There is only so much a parent can do before their children have to grow up and take responsibility for their own actions! I told Paige a hundred times not to stay out late, partying with god knows who and walking all over town late at night, wearing those skimpy little outfits...I mean it's practically begging for some-"

Madison stood up, trembling with the effort to stay in control.

"Mrs. Randall!" she interrupted, "Perhaps we should continue this conversation alone. Paige, would you mind waiting outside?" Madison asked, looking down at her, her heart aching for her underneath all the rage. Paige looked up, a defeated look in her eyes.

"It's ok, Dr. Nichols...it's nothing I haven't heard before," she said flatly.

Madison closed her eyes and sighed. She sat back down, slowly.

"Mrs. Randall," she spoke, quietly. "No matter what someone does, or wears, or where they might be, it is NEVER their fault for an attack like your daughter went through. The people at fault are the ones who decide to perpetrate these crimes. That is ALL. There is no need to try to place the blame on anyone else, and that includes you, the parents," she added, graciously. Mrs. Randall turned red in the face.

"Are you suggesting that it is OUR fault," she cried out, indignantly.

"No, not at all. What I am saying is that the past is in the past, what we all need to focus on is what we can do to help Paige heal, now. She needs your understanding, she needs to feel safe and have time to readjust to life," Madison said.

"What I want to know, Doctor, is how long this is going to take. Paige should be finishing school. She's already wasted two semesters doing nothing with her life, moping around and feeling sorry for herself. Now we are paying out the nose for this hospital, and after two weeks she is still the same, so I don't see what good any of this is going to do," she shook her head and looked at Paige, who sat huddled in the chair, her arms wrapped around her legs protectively.

"I don't think you know what you are saying, Mrs. Randall," Madison said, her hopes snuffed out completely for any good to come of the meeting. "Paige *is* making progress and will continue to, and it is crucial that she stays here for however long it takes. I can't give you a time frame, I just know that she will make it, she is worth the effort and time and if you don't want to be a part of that process then I don't think there is any need to continue this meeting," Madison said, through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Randall's nostrils flared and she stood up, looking Madison up and down with a scornful

glare.

"I think you're right, I don't see any point in continuing this. Call us when she's ready to come home." She said. "Ted, let's go," She said, and her husband stood up and followed her out, pausing briefly to put his hand on Paige's shoulder. She shrank from the touch and didn't look up.

Madison stood rooted to the spot as she watched them leave. She was completely enraged and stunned by their sheer heartlessness.

Madison looked down at Paige and walked around the desk to her. She knelt down by the chair.

"How are you doing?" she asked. She rested her hand on the arm of the chair, and Paige put her hand over hers.

"I'm ok, Doc. I'm used to it. Really...just please, don't invite them back here again, ever." she begged. Madison felt Paige's hand cover hers, and almost pulled it away, but stopped herself. Paige didn't need any more rejection right now. Not now. *She is actually comforting me*, Madison thought, in awe, and found herself wishing she could erase all those cruel words from her mother. She knew she couldn't.

"I won't," she said. "I promise you Paige, I will never ask them to come back here unless you want it," she said. "Listen to me," she went on, waiting until Paige looked at her, through wet eyes.

"You are so incredibly brave, and strong. Don't listen to a word your mother said, you *are* getting better, you *can* do this, you can do anything you set your mind to. It's all inside of you, Paige, I can see it! You have the power, not her, not those men who hurt you, not anyone else. You can make this life anything you want it to be. And if you have to do it without them, then so be it. You are a grown woman and you can make choices for yourself. And I'm here for you. Always." Madison said, her words tumbling over each other.

Paige said nothing. She reached out and cupped Madison's cheek with her hand, and smiled. Madison's eyes closed and Paige stroked her cheek gently with her thumb. Madison basked in this softest of touches from Paige before forcing herself to move back slowly, away from her, standing up. She didn't know what she was feeling but as deliciously sweet as it was...it was dangerous.

"I don't think your parents are going to be very involved in your treatment," Madison said, forcing her voice to sound cool and professional. "But you can do this without them, Paige. I know things got a little heated in here with them, I just wasn't expecting that sort of reaction from them at all."

"Thank you," Paige said, quietly. "You were...amazing. I've never heard anyone talk to my mom that way," she grinned. "You were great. I mean it...thanks," she said, and Madison sighed. She

had restrained herself greatly with Paige's mother. Oh, the things she would like to have said to that woman!

"Doc? You really...you really don't think it's my fault?" Madison heard her ask, softly.

"No, of course not!" Madison cried, her hatred towards her mother blooming inside her. "No, Paige...I meant everything I said to your mother. It isn't anyone's fault, you never asked for this to happen. Sometimes horrible things happen to good people. Sometimes there are bad people doing bad things and you just happen to be there at the wrong time. If it wasn't you it might have been someone else!" Madison said.

"But if I hadn't gone that night...if I hadn't walked down that street, at that time," Paige protested.

"But you did. You did, Paige...and god knows...I wish you hadn't but you didn't know! You didn't know," Madison said, feeling a sick ache in her chest at the thought of what she had been through. She would do anything to just make it all go away. She couldn't, but oh, how she wanted to.

Paige sniffled and seemed to contemplate Madison's words.

"I wish I hadn't either," she whispered, and Madison couldn't stop herself as she knelt down beside her chair again and reached out, feeling Paige move into her arms instantly. She held her close, stroking her hair. "I know," she whispered, as she felt Paige cry silently into her neck. "Oh, sweetheart, I wish you hadn't either."

If she thought she was dreading group before, Paige was really dreading it now. She wondered if Dr. Nichols was going to be leading group again today. She had skipped Monday's group session but she knew she had to face it sooner or later.

When she walked in, she saw Dr. Forbes, and breathed a sigh of relief. She was nervous at the thought of seeing Dr. Nichols again, for some reason. It didn't slip her notice that Dr. Forbes didn't look nearly as pleased to see her, however.

As everyone gathered around in a circle, Paige was shocked to see Dr. Nichols enter the room. She was embarrassed about their session the day before and breaking down in front of her, even if it had been so nice to be held in those arms again. And the incident in the gym on Friday was still fresh in Paige's mind as she watched her doctor walk up to the group.

"Hello ladies," she smiled around the room. "Dr. Forbes and I thought we'd both sit in on today's meeting. We have a special activity in mind. Does anyone have anything they need to discuss before we begin?"

Kris raised her hand. "Yes Kris?" Madison asked.

"I...just wanted to tell Paige that I'm sorry for Friday," Kris mumbled, looking down at the floor. "I didn't know...you know?" she asked, looking up at Paige. "Anyway I was a jerk and I'm sorry. I hope we can be friends," she added, hopefully. Paige looked taken aback, and took a moment to reply.

"Yeah...sure," she said finally. That was unexpected, to say the least. "I'm sorry too, for...Friday," Paige added, recalling her outburst. She glanced over at Madison and their eyes met briefly, and she looked quickly back down, wanting to disappear into the ground. God was she sorry for Friday!

"Thank you Kris, and Paige. I'm glad to see you guys working things out because that's what today is all about. Teamwork and trust." Dr. Forbes said brightly, ignoring the several groans that came from the girls.

"Everyone follow me," Dr. Forbes said, getting up and walking out of the room. The group followed, Paige trailing behind. Madison caught up with her.

"How are you doing," Madison asked her, glancing at her from the corner of her eye.

"Ok. How about you?" Paige asked, nervously.

"Great," Madison said, smiling at her. They followed the group into the gym, Paige groaning inwardly. Of all places. The gym!

"Ok, everyone stand around in a circle. Spread out a little more...that's it," Dr. Forbes said. "The first exercise is called *catch me if I fall*. It's a metaphor for life, sometimes we all need someone to be there to catch us when we fall. We're going to take turns, one person stands in the center of the circle and falls back, someone catches them, and then the circle moves around until everyone has caught them." The girls looked around suspiciously, as if wondering who might not catch them. Paige felt panic well up inside.

"Who wants to go first?" Dr. Forbes asked. Kris raised her hand.

"Great! Kris, go ahead, and make sure you are all paying attention, we don't want to drop anybody," she warned.

Kris took a few moments and then let herself fall backwards, towards Maria, who caught her in her arms and then helped her stand back upright.

"Excellent!" Dr. Forbes gushed. "Keep going," she encouraged. Kris kept going until everyone had caught her. Dr. Forbes and Madison were part of the circle as well, and caught her. Paige was surprised how good it felt to catch Kris, relieved that she hadn't missed and dropped her on her ass.

They all took turns, and Paige was last. As cheesy as it was, by the time it got around to her she felt obliged to finish the exercise...they had all trusted her to catch them, and she felt she had to return that trust. So she did. As she neared Madison, she started feeling panicked again, like she wanted to run. But there was no way out of this, not gracefully anyway. She took a deep breath and let herself fall, caught easily by the strong hands of her doctor. As she helped her to stand, Madison smiled at her. Paige felt her stomach do flips.

The most interesting part was when the doctors did the falling. Paige was loath to catch Dr. Forbes but she wasn't going to be that cruel to let her fall. When her turn came around to catch Madison, she felt her palms get sweaty and had a sudden fear that she wouldn't be able to catch her. But she did. She got another dazzling smile for that, and she grinned back, unable to stop herself.

"I am really impressed, that was wonderful," Dr. Forbes said, beaming around the room.

"Ok, this next one is a little different. Split into pairs and face each other," Dr. Forbes said, and the girls began chattering and grabbing their friends by the hands. After a few minutes everyone was paired up except Paige and Cathy. Paige moved to go stand next to Cathy, but Dr. Forbes grabbed Cathy first.

"Let me demonstrate with Cathy what we're going to do," she said. She stood facing Cathy, a few feet apart. "We're going to hold eye contact for 60 seconds. That's all...you can blink, this isn't a staring contest," she laughed, and the girls all laughed nervously too. "Just try to maintain eye contact for 60 seconds. I'll let you know when to start, just get ready."

Paige felt her heart beat faster as Dr. Nichols stepped closer. "I guess you're stuck with me," Madison said, smiling.

Paige smiled back at her weakly, standing in front of her a few feet apart. She was already lost in the warmth of those green eyes even before Dr. Forbes told them to begin. She never knew 60 seconds could be so long...or intense. Madison's eyes held hers, never breaking away, and Paige began to feel as if she were falling, the room spinning, but she forced herself to focus on the different shades of green and blue and yellow that made up those beautiful eyes in front of her. She glanced down after what felt like hours, but then corrected herself and looked back up, seeing Madison smile out of the corner of her eye.

"Alright...times up!" Dr. Forbes said. "How was that? I bet it was different than you thought it would be," she said, looking around the room, getting several nods and quiet "Mhmm's."

"Ok, stay where you are, this next one is a variation on this. This time, I want you to stand as far apart as you feel comfortable with. Just move wherever you need to, take a step back or forward, until you both feel like you're in your own comfort zone."

Everyone began shuffling around, moving to where they wanted to be, some closer, some further away. Madison didn't move. Paige wondered if it would look odd if she walked to the other end

of the gym and decided it would. She took a step back.

"Ok, it looks like everyone is in their comfort zone. Now, I want you to each take a step forward," Dr. Forbes said, and the girls all dutifully stepped forward. Paige cursed herself silently for only taking one step back. She and Madison both moved forward, finding themselves only a few hands widths apart.

"Now I want you to take a moment and think about how it makes you feel, to move out of your comfort zone and closer to someone. A little scary? Uncomfortable?"

Paige thought she might die on the spot. Madison gave a sheepish grin and Paige had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Ok, now move one step closer," Dr. Forbes said, and the girls all adjusted themselves. Paige rolled her eyes, wondering if they had planned this entire thing just to torment her. She took the smallest step forward and saw Madison do the same.

They were inches apart now, and as she looked at Madison, she felt as though they were back in that moment on Friday, here in the gym, inches apart. Paige was breathing faster, her heart racing. She could smell Madison's perfume, reminding her of the times she had been even closer to her...held in her arms, comforted...and then of course, kissing her. She balled her hands up into fists down by her side.

"Sometimes it is hard to let people inside our inner circle," Dr. Forbes was saying, Paige barely comprehending her words as she struggled to avoid Madison's eyes.

"It's hard, isn't it? It feels scary, sometimes, but when we do let people get close to us, and take that risk, wonderful things can happen," she went on. Paige closed her eyes tight, willing herself to disappear.

"Now, I want you to reach out and take the hands of the person in front of you. Just hold their hands and maintain your positions. We're going to do the eye contact again, for 60 seconds, with touch."

Paige turned her head, looking at the exit, looking ready to bolt. Madison reached out and grabbed her hands.

"It's ok," she whispered. "Paige, you can do this."

Paige reluctantly met her gaze, and felt Madison squeeze her hands. She felt her heart hammering in her chest, but started to relax as she saw the encouragement and affection in Madison's eyes. She wanted her to do this. *Ok...I can do this, it's no big deal*, Paige thought, and took a deep breath.

"Start....now," Dr. Forbes said and Paige gazed into the green depths once again, letting herself become lost there, in the place she felt most safe. She felt Madison's hands holding hers tightly,

and realized they were trembling. Paige moved her own thumb out and stroked her hand, softly, without even thinking about it...just comforting her. It felt right.

What are you thinking? Her eyes searched Madison's for answers. *What do you feel, right now?* Paige desperately wanted to know. She thought she saw so much there...but maybe it was just a reflection of her own eyes, her own conflicted emotions staring back at her.

"Time's up," Dr. Forbes said, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief and stepped back. Everyone but Paige. She was in a daze but snapped out of it when Madison broke eye contact.

"That's it," Madison said and let her hands go, after a final squeeze. "Good job," she added.

Paige swallowed hard, looking around the room and hoping everyone wasn't staring at her, seeing into her heart. She felt raw, and exposed. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to her.

"I think that's enough for today," Madison stepped forward and said, "It's been a pretty intense session. Let's leave it there for today, we might come back and do some more next time." The girls all broke up, leaving the gym, talking and giggling loudly.

Paige hurried to follow, anxious to avoid Dr. Nichols at all costs now. She felt her cheeks burning and she needed to get away.

"Paige?" It was her. She turned and saw her standing there.

"See you at three tomorrow?" She asked.

"Right. Three O'clock," Paige said, and ran out of the gym.

It was a rare occurrence for Madison to ever leave the hospital early, let alone before noon. But she had to get away, and she cancelled all her appointments for that afternoon and went home early.

She just needed to get away, she needed some space. Group therapy had not only been torturous for Paige. Madison was feeling a whole range of emotions but she refused to think about it. She took a long hot shower when she got home. *I'm just tired, burnt out. I just need a break.* She curled up in bed with just her bathrobe on, picking up a novel she had started months ago and never finished. After a few pages, she felt drowsy and curled up in the bed, letting sleep take her over.

There she was, standing in the gym, hitting that punching bag. Her arms lashing out and attacking the bag over and over. The sweat glimmering off her skin.

Paige. So beautiful...she moved closer, and Madison could hear her breathing, loud and heavy. Her tank top clung to her skin, and Madison took it all in, the pale creamy skin, her long, toned arms, her rounded shoulders, her collarbone, standing out proudly...the swell of her breasts, her nipples erect and visibly straining at the damp thin material. Her dark hair was swept up and her lips were full and so pink...

Paige moved closer and closer, until Madison could reach out and touch her. She did, taking Paige's hands in her own. Their eyes met and it was like an electric current ran between them, the shocking blue looking deeply into her own, holding her there, helpless to break away. She had to break away, she knew it, but she couldn't move her body, she was paralyzed.

Paige's eyes grew closer, and closer, and Madison could see into their very depths. She saw all the way down into her soul, and her heart ached to see the pain and the hurt inside. She wanted to make it all go away...but how? She opened her mouth to speak but no words came, she had to try to tell her with her eyes.

Then Paige's soft lips were moving against hers, kissing her deeply, in a hungry, angry way, her hands holding Madison's face there, pulling her closer, her body moving into her, her tongue pressing relentlessly into her mouth, that soft, warm tongue stroking inside her...

Madison woke up with a gasp, her heart pounding in her chest. It was only a dream...but as she struggled awake she felt her center throbbing.

She felt suddenly cold and empty.

She had never felt so alone or so...dirty. She had dreamed of Paige, *that way*...and had been turned on from dreaming about that kiss! *What the hell...I don't even like women that way! At least, I don't think I do,* she thought. Madison groaned and rolled over in her bed, covering her head with a pillow, hiding from the world in shame.

Everything, everything I have ever stood for is a sham! She cried out inside, letting the tears fall. *I am a professional! She is a patient! She needs me...needs me as her doctor, not a god damned lover! Look at today, look at how badly that group session was compromised because I couldn't keep my eyes off her or my emotions in check!* She hugged a pillow to her and felt her heart break. *She deserves better than this and you know it,* she told herself.

She couldn't agree with herself more.

When Paige knocked on the door, Madison called her in, steeling herself. "Come in."

Paige walked in, and Madison was rendered speechless as she looked up at her. Paige looked like a different person, her hair was brushed shiny and hung loose, the ends slightly curled. She had

on a little bit of makeup, her lips shiny with lip gloss. She wore a tight red t-shirt and khaki cargo pants, and she smiled brightly as she saw Madison's surprised expression.

"The girls wanted to play dress up and they picked me," she said, rolling her eyes apologetically. "But I did draw the line at pink ribbons in my hair and a dress," she added, scrunching up her nose in disgust. Madison struggled to find her voice. She looked so much...older and...beautiful.

"You look nice," she managed to croak out, looking down at her files on her desk. Paige sat in the chair opposite her, curling her body up in the large chair.

"I slept last night," Paige announced. "Without waking up," she added, looking expectantly at Madison. All Madison could think about was her dream, and she groaned inwardly. This timing for this couldn't possibly get any worse, she thought.

"That's great," she said, forcing a smile on her face. "That's really good news, Paige." She tried to sound enthusiastic.

"So what are we going to talk about today?" Paige asked, still sounding more chipper than Madison had ever heard her. Madison looked at her and realized how different, how changed she was. It was killing her to do this and yet...she had no choice.

"Actually Paige, I did want to talk to you about something."

Paige froze, looking worried.

"I'm going on a leave of absence and I am transferring your case over to Dr. Forbes," Madison went on. She watched as Paige's face went from relaxed and happy to confusion.

"For how long?" Paige asked.

"I'm not sure how long I'll be gone...a week or more." Madison began.

"So when you get back, I'll be seeing you again, right? Not Forbes?" Paige asked, anxiously.

Madison took a deep breath.

"No. I think it would be best if Dr. Forbes oversees your care from now on, Paige. I have a lot of administrative work to handle, and my workload is just too much right now," Madison said, hearing the words come out of her mouth and seeing them affect Paige as if she were being slapped in the face. Her face fell as she sat back in her chair.

"What? Why...why are you doing this? Is it because of yesterday? Or...what happened in the gym?" Paige asked, her voice shrill and panicked. "I told you I would never do that again, I'm sorry..."

"No...You didn't do anything wrong Paige. I just have to...to do this," Madison said, struggling to

keep the emotion from her voice. "I'm overworked as it is."

Paige sprung up from her chair. "I can't believe this! You're *overworked*?" she stared at Madison in utter disbelief, the tears and pain evident in her eyes.

"I'm sorry I was such a *burden* to you, Dr. Nichols! I am so sorry I took up so much of your *precious* time!" she ranted.

"I can't believe I trusted you! I thought...you cared! I let you in! You *said* you would be here for me. I can't fucking believe this." She was shaking with anger. "Go on your god damned leave. Dump me in someone else's lap. I could care less." She said angrily, and turned to leave. Madison wanted to call her back, to stop her, to explain. But what could she say?

"Paige! Wait." She got up and moved across the room, wanting nothing more than to grab her and pull her to her. Paige stopped, and waited. But Madison knew she couldn't. She couldn't touch her, not now. She couldn't even explain the real reasons she had to do this. Paige turned around, angry tears filling her eyes, looking like she could see right through her.

She left the room without another word. Madison turned her back to the door with an audible groan, her heart feeling as if it were being torn in two.

After handing in her leave of absence note, Madison left the hospital, and drove straight to Julia's. She just couldn't face being alone.

She knocked on their door and Julia answered. She took one look at Madison's face and held out her arms.

"Oh honey...what happened? What's wrong?" she asked as she hugged her tight. She felt Madison sob against her as she led her inside. Madison couldn't speak; she just lay on the couch, despondent. Julia stroked her hair and spoke soothing words to her, until Madison finally calmed down.

"Does this have anything to do with the girl from work?" Julia asked, finally.

Madison nodded. "I took a week off," she cried. "I can't do it," Madison sighed.

Julia rubbed her back some more.

"Do what Maddie?" she asked, concerned.

"I can't work with her, it isn't right," she said.

"Did...something else happen?" Julia asked, looking as though she was almost afraid to know.

"No! Well yes...but no," Madison sniffled again, blowing her nose loudly into a napkin Julia had handed her.

"Wow," Julia said, "That's informative!" she grinned. Madison tried to smile back.

"Nothing happened," Madison went on. "But I'm...thinking and feeling things that I shouldn't...not as her doctor," she cried, "So I turned her case over to a colleague...but she was so angry, Julia...she is so hurt...I can't believe I did this!"

"You...you did the right thing, Maddie," Julia said, all of this new territory for her as well. "You had to, right? And I am sure she'll be ok once she calms down." She said, reassuringly.

"I don't know. She was doing so well, too...she...she slept last night without any nightmares!" Madison groaned, miserably.

"What are your feelings for her, Maddie?" Julia asked.

"I...I don't know. I care for her a great deal...I want to protect her, help her, and...she makes me feel things I've never felt," Madison whispered, thinking of the feelings that had coursed through her when Paige's eyes had been locked onto hers, her hands in hers, during group therapy. "But it scares me and I don't want to do anything that could hurt her more."

"Why don't you stay overnight?" Julia said finally. "Todd is working late anyway and we can just have dinner and sit and watch old movies or something...how does that sound?" she asked, gently. Madison nodded, having no desire to go home right now.

"Thanks, Julia," she said, kissing her cheek. "Hey," she added as Julia stood up.

"Do you...do you think I'm a terrible person?" she asked, looking so frightened that it tore at Julia's heart. Julia sat back down and embraced her again.

"No! Never...I know you, Madison...you have a pure heart. You are one of the most honorable and trustworthy people I know."

Madison smiled. "Julia, what if...I mean, I never even thought about being with a woman but...what if I'm... Gay?" she asked, worriedly.

The thought just occurred to her, as she thought back on the men she dated and how unremarkable it had always felt, with them. Even the sex had never been...exciting for her. And now she suddenly had all these...feelings.

"You should know I would never feel any differently about you, Maddie...for gods sake I have known you since I was eighteen! You're my best friend. Who cares who you are attracted to?"

Madison laughed and kissed Julia's cheek. "Thank you Julia. I love you."

"I love you too. Now go clean yourself up and I'm going to go make some coffee."

They ordered pizza and watched reruns of I love Lucy late into the night. Madison laughed so hard she almost stopped thinking about Paige...for a little while. Almost.

It wasn't until she got home the next morning that she got the message. She had turned off her beeper and cell phone at Julia's, since she was on leave. On her home phone there was a message from Dr. Sachs, the hospital Director.

"Madison, this is Jeff...please come down to the hospital ASAP, we need to talk. Thanks."

His voice sounded odd, not his usual friendly tone of voice...and he had asked her to come down there. Why not just call? Madison contemplated calling him, but she decided it would be pointless if he wanted to see her. She felt the fear grip her as she got dressed, wondering what this was all about.

She was at the hospital by nine, and gave a brief glance down the hallway where Paige's room was before she took the elevator to the fourth floor where Sachs office was. His secretary seemed to be expecting her, and showed her right in. Jeff looked up as she entered the office, and stood up.

"Madison, thanks for coming down," he said, sounding very formal. This wasn't going to be good, she could feel it. "Have a seat," he said, gesturing to a chair, and she sat down, slowly.

"Jeff? What's going on," Madison asked, her anxiety growing with every passing moment.

"Well, a situation has come up and I need to discuss it with you."

She nodded, nervous.

"Your patient, Paige Randall?" he prompted, looking at Madison.

"What about her?" she asked, terror clawing at her stomach now. Was she ok? Did she do something...oh god...

"She's not my patient anymore," Madison interjected.

"Yes, I see that...you transferred her over to Forbes yesterday." Jeff said, glancing over some

paperwork.

"The thing is, Paige checked out last night against medical advice," he said, folding his hands and looking at her.

"What?" Madison asked.

"She checked in here on her own steam, you know she can check out anytime she wants," he reminded her. "She was apparently quite upset about being transferred, said she wouldn't work with Forbes...and then she left."

Madison struggled to stay calm and appear professional.

"I see. Well, what is it that I can do for you, Jeff? Would you like me to call her parents and try to get them to bring her back in?" she asked.

"No, Madison...that's part of the problem. We called her parents this morning, and she wasn't there, they had no idea she had even checked out. Of course, she is of legal age..." he trailed off, as Madison bolted out of her chair.

"She's not at home? Well, where is she? We have to find her!" she said, distressed.

"Madison. Sit down, please. There isn't anything we can do, she isn't a minor, and she doesn't have to call her parents. They are quite upset, understandably...unfortunately they are talking about legal action as well, especially if any harm comes to her."

"Why?" Madison asked. "We did nothing wrong, we had to release her, she's an adult."

"They seem to think that she had improper care, and that is why she left," he said, shrugging.

"Do *you* think she had improper care?" Madison asked, suddenly comprehending where this was going.

"No, no, not at all," Jeff reassured her...too convincingly. "But I do have to ask you some...personal questions. I'm sorry, Madison, if I could I would just walk away from this, but I'm afraid I can't." He said, solemnly. Madison gathered her inner strength...she hadn't got this far in her career without some core of inner strength, not to mention being able to stand up to men like Sachs.

"What questions, Jeff?" she asked, quietly, sitting back down in her chair weakly. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a book, handing it to her. It was Paige's sketchbook. She held her breath as she took it.

"Paige's roommate handed this over to the nurses after Paige left. She thought Paige would want it back," he said.

Madison hardly heard him as she slowly opened the book. The front page had a drawing of a pair of eyes...her eyes, she knew, even without color. She turned the page, her hand trembling. The next page was a sketch of her face...on the opposite page was a sketch of her hands, right down to the scar on her pinky. She turned the pages, unable to stop. Her face again, smiling. She turned another page and closed her eyes briefly, feeling a stab of pain. There was a sketch of Madison, holding Paige in her arms, on the floor, her hand on her hair as if stroking it. It was the night she had hurt herself, and Madison had held her.

The next page had a drawing of the two of them, embracing, kissing. Everything down to the tank top Paige had been wearing, and her hands on Madison's face.

She turned another page, feeling the heat scorch her face and tears well up in her eyes. The two of them, face to face, holding hands and looking into each others eyes. The trust exercise. She turned the pages until there was nothing but blank pages left, and closed it. She recalled what she had told Paige when she gave her the sketch book.

"Sometimes we can express feelings on paper or through art that we can't find words for."

She looked back up at Jeff with tears in her eyes.

"Jeff," she began.

"Those are not just figments of her over-active imagination, are they Madison," he stated rather than asked, not really needing her to answer after the look on her face.

"It's...it's not what you think, honestly, I can explain," Madison said, pleadingly.

"I'm afraid it's gone too far for that," Jeff said, sadly. "This has to be brought before the ethics committee, Madison, you know it as well as I do."

"Oh god no, Jeff! I did nothing wrong! I swear it to you," Madison broke off, seeing those drawings again in her mind. How the hell did it look? It looked bad. Very bad.

"I was also informed by staff that she slept in your office on several occasions. Is that true?" Jeff asked, blind siding her. She forced herself to stay calm.

"Yes, but only because she-"

"Don't bother explaining it now, wait for the committee." Jeff said, sounding tired.

"As of today you're on paid leave, until the meeting in two weeks," Jeff said, apologetically.

"Ok," she said stiffly, drawing herself up straight. "If that's the way you want it to be, fine. But I will not go without a fight Jeff. I worked hard for this and you know it. And I did nothing wrong," She turned to walk out.

"Madison!" Jeff called out. She turned, hoping to see a change of heart on his face. He held out his hand. "Leave the sketch book with me."

She tossed it on his desk, and walked out, holding her head high until she got to her car.

Then she let the tears fall, for the job she might lose, for Paige who was somewhere out there, alone and hurt...and she cried as she thought of those drawings. Two things were very obvious. Not only was Paige extremely talented, but one other fact was made perfectly clear...had screamed out from each and every stroke of that pencil.

Paige was...or at least, thought she was, in love with her.

It was difficult dealing with the nightmares, staying in a small apartment. Paige didn't want to wake Leah up, or her boyfriend, so she never turned on any lights. She usually just sat in the dark and waited for morning. She missed her sketchbook. She hoped Cathy had hung onto it. She was mortified to think what would happen if Dr. Nichols ever saw it.

Dr. Nichols. Paige still saw red every time she thought about her. She felt so foolish, so stupid. Of course it had all been in her head. She was crazy after all, right? Madison didn't care about her. It was just a job to her, she saw that now, clearly. A part of her job she didn't even care very much about, apparently. Paige shoved all her feelings and happy memories away. That was all gone now.

She was staying with Leah and her boyfriend Tommy. She wasn't about to go home, she knew her mother would only drag her back to the hospital. And she was never going back there again. She never wanted to see that woman's face again.

It had been a week since she left, and already she was getting used to life on the outside again. It felt good being free, hanging out with friends, partying. Paige immersed herself in this new life, anxious to forget about what she had left behind. The only drawback was the nightmares were worse than ever, and so was her phobia of people. Leah and Tommy had friends over all the time, and they made Paige so jumpy that she usually hid out in the bedroom until they were gone, which wasn't often.

"Hey, Paige! We're going to the store, you wanna come?" Tommy shouted upstairs.

"No, I'll stay here," she shouted back. She had no real desire to go anywhere. She sat in the bedroom, allowing thoughts of Madison to creep back into her head. She felt such an

overwhelming sense of loss that it made it hurt to breathe. She wanted to feel her arms around her, one more time...see those eyes smile at her once more. She suddenly needed to take the hurt on the inside and bring it to the outside. She needed to cut. She got up and turned her music up louder.

She opened the drawer next to her and took out a small bundle of cloth. She unrolled it and took out a shiny new razor blade, the kind you buy in a little box. She had it hidden in her drawer and had used it several times already, just drawing enough blood to satisfy the ache. Tonight she was aching, badly. She drew the sharp thin blade across her pale skin on her inner arm, watching as the skin parted neatly and the blood rose to the surface in little beads before seeping out. The slight sting that followed was what she was after, and she closed her eyes, letting the pain wash over her, somehow dulling the ache in her heart.

All she could see was Madison's eyes, and remembered the touch of her hands, holding hers so softly. Paige remembered the feel of her lips responding to her kiss. How good it felt to be held in her arms, so loved, so protected. Then she remembered the cold, indifferent look on her face when she told her she was leaving and shoving her off onto Forbes.

Paige felt the tears course down her face as she cut herself again, slashing deeper across her arm. She wasn't crying from the cuttings, those just felt good. She was crying because she felt as if her heart was breaking. *I obviously wasn't worth the effort after all, was I*, she thought bitterly, remembering Madison's speech to her parents. She squeezed her arm, mesmerized by the small streams of blood running down her arm. She sighed and leaned back in the bed, finally able to concentrate on her arm instead of her heart. She fell asleep after a while, at peace if only for a few short hours.

"Madison! Maddie! Open this door or I swear to god I am going to break it down!" Julia yelled, banging on the heavy oak door. "Or at least a window! You know I will!"

Suddenly the door opened, and Julia gave a small gasp of surprise.

"Oh. Well, good!" she said, and pushed through the door. Madison was standing there blinking in the sunlight that was streaming through the door. Julia hugged her and then pulled away, looking her over.

"Maddie...you look like hell. What is going on? You haven't returned my phone calls, and when I called the hospital they said you were on leave...but you never told me. What's going on?" Julia asked, looking her friend up and down. Madison was wearing a white camisole and grey pajama bottom pants, and looked like she had just woken up. Her hair was sticking up every which way and her eyes had bags underneath them.

"I'm sorry. I've just been...god. It's complicated." Madison padded off into the living room and Julia followed her. They sat down on the couch, which Madison quickly stripped of the blankets and pillows she slept with.

"So what's going on hon?" Julia prodded her, as Madison curled her legs under her and sighed.

"Well, I am on paid administrative leave, which means I am basically fired," she said, rubbing her temples. "My patient- yeah THAT patient, ran away and nobody knows where she is."

Madison spent a week in deep desperation and depression. She called Paige's mother, even, to try to find out where she might be. She knew nothing and was not happy to hear from her, giving her an earful of what she thought of the hospital and her program before she hung up on her. Madison even drove around aimlessly, looking for her, but of course she had no idea where Paige might have gone. Seattle was a huge city, and that was assuming she was even here anymore. After a few days of hoping and looking, Madison gave into the depression and did nothing more than sleep and worry.

Julia interrupted her thoughts. "Babe, I am so sorry. Why didn't you call me?" she asked, sounding hurt.

"I'm sorry Julia. I just...couldn't. It hurts too much," Madison said, and Julia held her and hugged her. "What happened with work? Why are you on leave?" she asked, finally.

"The Director called me in, and showed me my patients sketch book. She...she drew pictures of me, and of us...in compromising situations. I couldn't deny that they were accurate, even though they look a lot worse than they are!" she half laughed, half sobbed. "And he mentioned me letting her sleep in my office. She had nightmares and never got enough sleep...I was just trying to help her," Madison said.

"Shit. That's bad," Julia responded, bluntly. Madison laughed again.

"God I love you. You always know how to cheer me up."

"What are you going to do?" Julia asked.

"I'm going to wallow in my own filth until I have to go into the ethics committee meeting next week. I'm going to tell them the truth and see what happens. I want to fight it but honestly Julia...I feel so...tired. And you know maybe they are right, maybe I'm not cut out for this job. Maybe I did cross a line."

You know you crossed the line, her mind pointed out. At least in your dreams you did.

"I just worked so hard for that job, and where I am today...I have to at least try," Madison sighed.

She couldn't tell Julia the worst part though. The truth was, she didn't really even care about her

job. That was like a minor irritation compared to losing Paige, not knowing where she was or if she was ok. That was what knocked her down and kept her on her knees, literally, night and day, staggered by the pain and the loss. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the devastated look in those beautiful blue eyes as she told her she was transferring her case over. The look of utter betrayal on her face. And she saw those sketches, so lovingly drawn, of her...of both of them together. They were so incredible. That Paige saw her like that...thought she was that beautiful...that sensual...just blew her away. And now she could never tell her she'd seen them. How much they meant to her.

"Of course you're going to try!" Julia said, cheerfully. "And you are not going to wallow in your filth another moment. Go get in the shower, I am taking you out." She said, firmly.

"Julia! No!" Madison protested, groaning.

"Nope, don't even try to argue with me. It is girl's night and I want my drinks, so go on, go get ready!" she shooed Madison off, trying to smack her ass as she rose from the couch.

"Alright, alright I'm going," Madison mumbled grumpily. "But I'd rather wallow!" she called back, as she went to shower.

Madison sat at the table, sipping her glass of wine slowly. Julia was talking about her upcoming vacation with Todd to Mexico, and Madison was smiling and nodding, but not really listening. She had to admit it felt pretty good being out in the real world again, it almost made her feel normal and alive. Almost. But her mind was still elsewhere.

"You're not even listening, are you?" Julia pouted. Madison looked up, guiltily.

"Yes I am! You're talking about Mexico." She said defensively.

"The last thing I said was that we were going to try to eat an entire whale when we were in Mexico," Julia grinned.

"Oh," Madison said, grinning sheepishly. "Sorry Julia...it sounds like a great trip."

Julia reached out and took her hand. "Everything is going to work out fine, I just know it," she said. "Do you want me to come with you to the board meeting next week?"

"No, you're sweet to offer but it's not open to the public," Madison said, smiling at her friend. "Thank god," she added as an afterthought.

Madison shuddered, she hadn't really given much thought to her career or her reputation so far.

Her mind was too preoccupied with worrying about Paige. She was tormented with images of her hurt and alone, unable to get help. She fought back another wave of panic as she pushed her thoughts aside.

It was at that moment that she glanced over at the bar and saw her.

She blinked, her eyes snapping suddenly wide open. She felt all the blood rush out of her face. It couldn't be...could it? Her eyes were just playing tricks on her, right? Julia, seeing the odd look come over Madison's face, shook her hand gently.

"Maddie? What's wrong?" she asked, worried. Madison didn't respond, her eyes glued to the girl at the bar with long dark hair. She was standing next to several other young people, all laughing and talking, with her back to Madison. She willed the girl silently to turn around. It couldn't be Paige, that was ridiculous. And yet...

Slowly the girl turned around, and even from the side view Madison knew. It *was* Paige. She let out a gasp and looked at Julia, her eyes filling with tears. She clapped her hand over her mouth, shaking her head.

"Maddie...talk to me. You're scaring me!" Julia said. "What is it sweetie?"

Madison's head was reeling. She tried to take a deep breath and hold back the sob of sheer relief that wanted to escape. She became dimly aware that she was in a crowded bar full of people. She looked at Julia and swallowed the sob.

"I- I'm ok," she said. "I can't...tell you, Julia, it's a Doctor thing," she said, annoyed that she couldn't even confide in her best friend right now.

"Oh to hell with that, tell me whets going on," Julia snapped. "I'm worried about you!"

"I just saw someone, here, but I can't say who," Madison said, her eyes never leaving the tall dark haired girl walking over to a table across the room.

Julia's eyes followed her gaze and she suddenly understood.

"Ohhh! That's...her isn't it? The one you've been so worried about. Well, see, she's ok!" Julia said, looking pleased with herself for figuring it out. "I have to admit she is pretty hot, Madison," Julia added, eyeing Paige. Madison shot her a glare.

Madison's heart was beating in her chest so fast she thought it would explode. Paige was here...and she was ok. Madison fought the urge to get up and go to her. To call out. She struggled to hold it together. She was still under obligation to keep Doctor-Patient confidentiality with Paige. She couldn't go talk to her in front of her friends. She couldn't tell Julia about it. All she could do was sit here and watch her.

She looked...good, Madison admitted. Fairly healthy...though it was hard to see from here. She

was dressed casually in jeans and a faded brown vintage t-shirt, and wore clunky black boots, her hair hanging loose and straight all around her face. She looked...very good, Madison thought, again. Beautiful. Everything in her ached to go and see her, talk to her, touch her, convince herself that she was real and alive. She saw her chance when Paige got up from the table and walked to the back of the room, towards the restrooms.

"Julia, I have to go talk to her," Madison said, getting up from the table shakily.

"K. do you want me to come?" Julia asked.

"No...it has to be alone," Madison said, and without looking back, headed to the restrooms. She pushed open the women's door and saw her, a few feet away at the sink.

"Paige," she said, her voice oddly rough. Paige turned around and saw Madison, a look of shock coming over her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice hard. "Are you...following me?"

"No! I was here with a friend...I just saw you, and I..." Madison trailed off.

"You what...wanted to come and talk me into going back? Forget it...that's not going to happen," Paige said. Madison's eyes flicked over Paige, taking in once again that she was whole and safe. Then she saw the cuts on her arm as she moved her arms to fold them across her chest.

"Paige," she said, her eyes furrowing in concern.

"I am not your patient anymore, Dr. Nichols," she said, glaring. "Or don't you recall that minor detail?" Madison felt the air knocked out of her, and struggled for words.

"I've been so worried about you, I'm just so glad to see that you're ok," she said, quietly.

"I'm fine. So if you don't mind, I'll be leaving," Paige said, moving to go past Madison who was still standing by the door.

Madison reached out and grabbed her arm, gently, but not wanting to let her go yet.

"Paige, wait...you should call your parents, they are very worried and upset," she pleaded.

Paige turned and looked at her with daggers in her eyes. "My parents are worried? You *do* recall meeting my parents, don't you Dr. Nichols?" Madison noticed the use of her full name and felt the sting of it each time Paige used it.

"They don't give a crap about me, and you know it. But then you know all my dirty little secrets, don't you? You're just the same as my parents, so don't give me this bullshit about being worried about me. You're probably just worried cuz you're getting crap at work because I ran off." Paige practically spat, with venom dripping from each word.

"Don't you compare me to that woman!" Madison said through clenched teeth. "I am NOT your mother, Paige."

Paige gave a bitter laugh. "Thank god for that...or I would be even more messed up that I thought," she said. Madison caught the meaning even if Paige didn't realize she would.

Madison took a deep breath. "Paige, I *am* worried about you. I had to transfer you over to Dr. Forbes; I didn't have a choice..."

"Of course you had a choice! You didn't want to deal with me anymore so you shoved me off onto someone else! I'm not stupid, I can take a hint!" Paige yelled.

"I couldn't treat you anymore because I was...!" Madison shouted, stopping short, her words echoing off the bathroom walls. Her heart thumped wildly against her ribs and she stepped back, releasing Paige's arm in horror.

"You were what?" Paige demanded, stepping closer to her. Madison struggled to find the right words.

"I allowed myself to get too close. I lost my objectivity...I do care, Paige, that's the problem. I care *too* much."

Paige opened and closed her mouth several times. Her face twisted in pain and confusion and she looked like she was wrestling with something.

Madison reached out to touch her and she shrank back.

"Don't...just don't. I have to go," she mumbled, and turned and started to walk away.

Madison fumbled in her wallet for her card and thrust it at her.

"Paige, wait- here's my number, if you need anything. Just promise you'll call if you're in trouble."

Paige grabbed the card and stormed out of the bathroom, not even responding.

Madison was left standing there alone, trembling, trying to comprehend what had just happened. She slowly walked over to the sink and looked in the mirror. Her eyes were red and her face pale. She splashed water on her face, and dried it off, slowly making her way back out into the bar.

If she thought that was the worst point of her night she was very wrong.

When she got back to the table, Julia was ordering more drinks. Madison had hoped to drag her away as soon as she got back, but now she had to stay. All she wanted to do was hide.

"How did it go?" Julia asked. Madison just shook her head.

"Get me a drink, please," she whispered. "A very strong drink." Julia went to the bar to get it and Madison glanced over across the room at Paige, who was seated at the table with her friends again. She saw Paige lean over and whisper to a girl sitting next to her. They both laughed and Madison thought how strange it was to see Paige in this setting, and laughing, while she was sitting here dying inside.

Julia returned with a shot of tequila, which Madison swallowed in one shot. Madison tried to keep talking normally with Julia, as hard as it was. She nursed her wine, glancing over at Paige occasionally despite her best efforts not to. In the middle of the bar some people were dancing. Julia always tried to get her to dance with her but Madison always resisted, not being a very good dancer herself. Julia tried yet again tonight, but Madison was adamant. There was no way she felt like dancing tonight. She didn't mind watching Julia go make a fool out of herself though, and encouraged her to do so. At least this way she wouldn't have to keep up a conversation.

As she watched Julia wave her hands in the air and generally be silly, Madison saw Paige make her way onto the dance floor, holding hands with the girl she had been sitting next to. Madison couldn't tear her eyes off them as they started dancing together, the shorter blonde girl moving in front of Paige and pressing up against her front, as they both moved their hips to the fast beat of the music. Paige turned the girl around to face her and the girl wrapped her arms around Paige's waist, as Paige slid her leg in between the blonde's and ground against her in a blatantly sexual manner. Madison just stared, in shock at first, and then felt the anger and jealousy bloom inside her, watching Paige's hands cup the blonde's ass and pull her against her. She felt her face grow hot and her mouth go dry, sipping her wine again just to have something to do. Her hand shook so badly she spilled wine on the table, and she set it down.

Then Paige looked up, right at her. Madison tried to look away, tried to act as though she didn't care but was sure her face looked as horrified as she felt. Paige's face didn't reflect anything but sheer lust...as she looked back down at the blonde girl, that is. She smiled back up at Madison, with a mocking, knowing smile, and took the blonde's face in her hands, bringing her lips down and kissing her. Madison watched, unable to look away, a wave of pain crushing her, till she felt she couldn't breathe.

Paige finally pulled away from the girl, and made sure she looked over and met Madison's eyes once more, a defiant look on her face.

Madison got the message loud and clear. You're not the only one who can hurt people, cause pain. Reject someone.

Julia came panting over to the table, drinking some water.

"Julia...I need to get out of here. Please!" Madison begged.

"Ok sweetie, we can go...are you alright?" She asked yet again.

"No. I am not alright," Madison said, trembling as she stood up. She looked once more at Paige, no longer looking her way as she danced with her arms wrapped around the blonde girl.

"I am definitely not alright."

Her pager went off at three thirty a.m., which is never a good thing. Madison fumbled around for it, instantly worried about Julia, or the hospital, although she wasn't sure why they would be calling her. Nobody paged her at three in the morning with good news. The number on it was local but unfamiliar. With a sigh, Madison picked up her cell phone and dialed it. If it was a wrong number she was going to kill someone.

"Dr. Nichols?" she heard a woman's voice answer on the other end of the line.

"Yes, who...who is this?" Madison asked, still groggy and confused, not to mention slightly hung over.

"My name's Leah, I don't know if you know who I am ...I'm Paige's friend," the voice on the phone said.

Suddenly Madison was wide awake and switching on the light by the couch. "Leah, yes Paige mentioned your name. What's wrong?" she asked, fear gripping her heart.

"She would probably kill me if she knew I was calling you, but I didn't know who else to call. Her parents probably wouldn't even answer."

"Leah, is Paige alright?" Madison demanded.

"She's freaking out...she woke up screaming and saying she couldn't breathe...she wouldn't calm down, just kept saying your name...and now she's locked in the bathroom and I'm scared, she's been cutting so much lately and I just didn't know what else to do! I got your pager number from her wallet." Leah cried into the phone.

Madison thought of her options. The cops might get there faster but oh...god...what that would do to Paige. She could just imagine the scene with the cops busting down the bathroom door, literally, and trying to restrain a hysterical Paige. The thought of it made her feel sick.

"Leah, where do you live? I can come right now, just tell me how to get there," Madison said, grabbing her keys and walking out the door.

She drove as fast as she could without getting pulled over, not wanting a delay. It took her twenty minutes to get across town to where Leah lived, but she finally found the small apartment complex. She dashed up the flight of stairs two at a time, banging loudly on the door.

The small blonde girl opened the door, and Madison reacted physically, recoiling as she recognized her from the bar, until she got a grip on herself. None of that mattered, only Paige.

"Where is she?" she asked, and Leah led her down a hallway. There was a master bedroom and bathroom and that was where Leah took her.

"She's in there, it's locked," Leah said, looking worried. "She hasn't spoken to me in like an hour," she cried. Madison went to the door and tried the doorknob. It was locked. She looked at it and saw a hole in the center of the doorknob.

"Leah, get me something sharp and thin, I can pick this lock. Hurry!" she barked, when Leah just stood there.

Madison rapped on the door, the fear pulsing through her.

"Paige? Paige honey...please talk to me, its Madison," she said, listening for any noise.

"Paige...damn it! Please!" she cried, her voice breaking. She leaned her forehead against the door.

There was no sound. Madison smacked the door with her palm. "I am coming in there Paige, will you please just...tell me if you're ok," she begged.

Leah came back with in ice pick in her hand.

"Will this work?" she asked, scared. Madison took it from her hand and began jamming it into the hole in the doorknob, twisting and turning it. She started to worry that she would have to break the door down, when she heard the click. She dropped the ice pick and turned the doorknob, swallowing the bile that rose to her throat from fear.

Paige sat on the floor, huddled between the cramped space between the toilet and the bathtub. Her knees were folded up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, her head buried in her arms. Madison sighed in relief as she didn't see any blood.

She went to Paige and knelt on the floor.

"Paige, sweetie," she whispered, and touched her softly. She lifted her head from her arms, needing to see for certain that she was ok. Paige didn't fight her, but didn't really help either. She was conscious though, and she looked up at Madison. Her eyes seemed glazed over, but as she looked at Madison, they became more focused and clear, like she was coming out of a daze.

"Madison," she whispered. It was the first time Madison heard her say her name, her first name, and she felt the tears come to her eyes at the sound of it.

"Paige...what are you doing?" she cried, the relief sweeping over her, as she stroked Paige's face.

"I...I don't know..." Paige said, quietly. "I woke up from a dream and couldn't breathe...and then I thought about tonight and seeing you and it hurt so much..." she began crying softly, covering her face with her hands.

"And then I locked myself in here because I wanted to find you," she said, sniffing.

"Find me? In...the bathroom?" Madison asked, half laughing and half crying. She worried that maybe Paige was on drugs or really had finally lost it.

"My safe place," Paige said, looking back up. "I just wanted to go back to my safe place," she said.

"You mean, my office?" Madison asked in a choked voice. She realized Paige meant her safe place, like she had found that day in her office during their relaxation therapy session.

"No...you. You are my safe place." Paige said.

Madison pulled Paige out from her cramped space and into her arms, feeling her willingly wrap her arms around her neck and snuggle in closer.

Madison stroked her face, her hair. It felt so good to hold her again, to know that she was safe.

"Please don't hate me," Paige cried. "I'm sorry," she said, and Madison knew she meant for the bar, the kiss.

"I know," Madison whispered. "Its ok, Paige. I could never hate you."

"I hurt you!" Paige sobbed, closing her eyes in shame. "It was only Leah...she was just doing it because I made her," she said, looking miserable.

"I hurt you too. And I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am, how completely miserable I have been," Madison said. "I never meant to hurt you, Paige. I do care. Oh god...I care. I just couldn't...I couldn't be your doctor and feel the way I do about you...do you understand?" she asked, begging her silently to say yes and not make her explain any further.

"Yes," Paige said. "I do. I just didn't want to lose you," she cried.

"You could never lose me, Paige. I told you I would always be there...and I will. I know I didn't explain it very well...I was scared, too."

She held Paige in her arms, silently, letting the waves of relief and peace wash over her. Paige leaned her head back, looking up at her. Madison saw the scar on her throat, and ran her fingertips over it lightly, tenderly. Paige didn't flinch or pull away.

"You're in your pajamas," Paige said, accusingly, with a teasing grin.

Madison laughed. "Well, yeah. I'm not superman, I can't stop to change in a phone booth *every* time I come in the middle of the night and save you," she said, smiling down at her.

Paige looked down sheepishly. "Thank you," she said, softly.

"I'm so glad you didn't hurt yourself tonight Paige," Madison whispered. "I am so proud of you."

Paige just nodded, her breathing returning to normal. Madison picked up Paige's left arm and turned it over, looking at the cuttings and scabs that criss-crossed her wrist and arm. She winced as she surveyed the damage, none of it too deep or extensive, thankfully. Paige waited for the admonitions, but got none, as Madison laid it gently back in her lap.

"Can you take me back? To the hospital?" Paige asked, finally.

Madison hesitated, unsure of how to tell her.

"Paige...I can drop you off but, I can't be there with you, or check you in," she said, quietly.

"Why not?" Paige asked, her eyes flying open.

"They put me on administrative leave," she said.

Paige sat up in her arms. "It's because of me, isn't it," she said, rather than asked.

Madison shook her head.

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. It's just something I need to deal with."

"But...you didn't do anything...how did they know?" Paige asked, ignoring Madison's denial and guessing what it was about.

Madison looked down at her and sighed. "Cathy turned your sketchbook in, Paige. To Dr. Sachs."

Paige's eyes widened in horror.

"Did you...did they show it to you?"

Madison held onto her tighter, anticipating she would pull away.

"Yes," she said. "It was beautiful," she said, feeling the girl tense up and pull away, looking mortified. "So beautiful. I loved your drawings, Paige. They mean so much to me."

Paige stopped trying to pull away, but still looked stricken.

"I...I'm so sorry I got you in trouble...I just...it made me happy, drawing you, at night when I couldn't sleep. It was like you were there with me, and it made everything...better," she said, looking ashamed.

"I am so glad you did," Madison said, pulling her back into her, holding her close. "Those drawings were amazing and...I loved them. You didn't do anything wrong. It's just that once the Director saw them, well- it doesn't look very good for me, that's all," she said. "It really doesn't look good for me," she repeated.

"What are you going to do?" Paige asked her, her voice sounding small and scared.

"There's a meeting next week, I'll have to testify and give my side of things and...we'll see. I don't want you to worry about that, Paige. I can handle it. I just want you to be safe, and if you want to go back, I will be happy to drive you there right now. It's up to you."

Paige thought about it for several long moments.

"Yeah. I want to go back," she said, finally.

"Good girl. I'm so glad," Madison said, relieved. At least she would know Paige was safe, even if she couldn't be there. She leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Paige's forehead. She allowed herself to breathe her in, one more time...to hold her for just a moment more.

"Are you ready?" she asked, finally. Paige nodded. Madison disentangled them both and helped Paige to stand. They stood facing each other.

Paige moved closer and started to lean in. Madison pulled away quickly, putting a trembling hand out to stop her.

"Paige...I can't. Please...don't make this any harder than it already is. I can't walk into that meeting with a clear conscience if you...if I let myself kiss you," She breathed, raggedly. Paige looked hurt, but then her face softened as she saw the inner turmoil on Madison's face.

"I know. I'm sorry, Doc," she said, softly.

"Doc...well I am glad to hear that name again," Madison chuckled. "Paige...you can call me Madison, at least when we are alone. Ok?"

Paige smiled. "Ok, Madison," she tried it out. "It's a pretty name." She said.

"Thank you. It sounds pretty, when you say it... but I need to get out of here and take you to the hospital," Madison said, turning around to collect herself for a moment, missing the beaming smile on Paige's face at the compliment.

It was incredible, and strange, the pull she felt towards Paige. All she wanted to do was to hold

her, love her, protect her and yes...kiss her, damn it. But she knew with every fiber in her being that she couldn't do it. It just...wasn't right. On so many levels.

"You ready?" she asked, turning around. Paige nodded.

"Go get dressed. I'll be waiting outside the apartment for you," she said, and walked away.

Her hands shook as she buttoned up her jacket, glancing in the mirror one last time. She looked about as conservative and harmless as she possibly could, in a cream colored skirt suit and blouse, with a matching jacket. She wore stockings and matching shoes with a slight heel, and a simple silver necklace. Her hair and make-up were impeccable, and she looked dressed to kill.

Only Madison didn't need to kill, she just needed the ethics committee to see her as a normal, clean cut, upstanding Doctor. Which she was, she reminded herself. She had done nothing wrong, even if she did feel guilty as sin. She hadn't done anything to deserve this.

She had already felt some of the repercussions from the situation, when she took Paige into the hospital. She noticed the long, curious stares from the staff, the disapproving looks as she escorted the girl back into the young adult's wing. Even her co-workers and nurses had behaved coldly towards her...everyone except Trisha, who smiled warmly at her and seemed her usual cheery self. She was sure it wasn't helping matters to be seen bringing Paige in. However, she ignored it; the benefits of having Paige back there, safe and unharmed, far outweighing any negative backlash.

The meeting was in an hour, and Madison felt her stomach flutter nervously. She drove to the hospital and resisted the urge to go and see Paige. She knew that was the last thing she should do today of all days. She walked determinedly to the meeting room on the main floor.

She was fifteen minutes early, and the room was buzzing with people and activity, setting up chairs and people arriving. Madison sat at the large rectangular table, waiting, fidgeting with her hands under the table nervously. She willed her breakfast to stay down, feeling more and more ill with each passing minute.

Finally it was 10:00 and most of the committee members and administration officials were seated. A few had greeted her, but most ignored her completely.

The secretary opened up the meeting, reading the minutes and going over some trivial matters and announcements. At last, Dr. Sachs stood up and addressed the room.

"As most of you know, the main subject of today's meeting is to discuss the situation with Dr. Madison Nichols. It was brought to my attention about two weeks ago that her relationship with

a female patient was being brought into question. I am here to present the facts as I know them, and Dr. Nichols is here to explain her actions. The patient in question has requested that she be allowed to present her testimony to the committee, although the usual procedure of interviewing her has already taken place." he finished.

Madison's head whipped around.

Paige was seated behind her, along with Trisha. They must have snuck in after the meeting had started. Paige flashed her a bright smile, and Madison used all her professionalism and self control not to grin back like an idiot.

An hour later Madison rose from her chair and walked out of the room, willing her legs to stop shaking. When she got outside the door she leaned against the wall, letting out a shaky sigh. The door opened and Paige and Trisha walked out.

Madison smiled at both of them. "Thank you for coming, Trish...it meant so much to me." She hugged the nurse who returned the hug and grinned bashfully.

"I only told the truth, no need to thank me for that," she said. Madison looked over at Paige. Trisha spoke up again, talking to Paige.

"Honey, I'm going upstairs, Carol will have a fit if I'm not back on my shift soon. I'm sure the Doc here will make sure you get back," she smiled, walking down the corridor.

Madison smiled at Paige, feeling suddenly shy and tongue tied. Paige looked beautiful and sophisticated in a white short sleeved top laced up the front and tan corduroy trousers. She looked happy.

"Thank you for coming," Madison said, looking around nervously. "It won't be good if they come out of the room and see us alone here though."

"Follow me!" Paige said, grinning. She walked off down the hallway quickly, and Madison followed. Paige opened a door and stepped in, Madison right behind her. They were in the stairwell.

"Nobody takes stairs anymore right?" Paige asked. She was answered with Madison pulling her in for a hug, squeezing her tightly. Paige hugged her back, holding on until Madison pulled away.

"Paige...you didn't have to do that," she said. "Don't get me wrong, it was...amazing, and if they don't fire me it will be because of you...your testimony was amazing! But I didn't want you to have to hear that, witness that," Madison said.

"I know...but Madison, you can't protect me from everything bad out there. You're the one who

keeps reminding me how strong I am. How could I not come today, knowing that I am the one who got you into this mess to begin with?" Madison started to object, but Paige put her hand up. "I would do...anything for you," she said. "You've given me so much...this was nothing compared to what you've done for me."

Madison smiled and placed her hand on her cheek. "I wish I could do so much more." She said, wistfully. "You were spectacular. But...you lied for me, Paige." She said. "You didn't have to do that," she said, withdrawing her hand and looking guilty.

"I didn't lie!" Paige said, defensively. "Well...ok, maybe one minor, minor white lie." She said, her lips curving into a smile she couldn't hide. Madison saw it and smiled back, unable to help herself.

"It's not your fault though...you couldn't help responding to my animal magnetism when you kissed me back," Paige went on, gleefully enjoying Madison's obvious discomfort for a moment as she recalled that fateful day in the gym.

"Paige..." Madison said, in a warning tone.

"You look *gorgeous* today, by the way," Paige added suddenly, looking her up and down appreciatively. Madison felt her cheeks burn and she laughed and shook her head.

"You're a pain in the ass, do you know that?"

Paige grinned unashamed.

"You clean up pretty good yourself, kid," Madison said, lightly bantering and trying to keep the conversation frivolous.

"Now...I have to get you back upstairs without being seen. " She looked up the stairwell. "I guess we'd better start climbing."

"I guess so," Paige smiled, and they began climbing the stairs, side by side.

"I miss you," Paige said, as they climbed.

"I miss you too," Madison said, softly.

It was gratifying to see the sheepish downcast looks and sudden change of heart from everyone at the hospital when Madison returned to work the next week. The board found her clear and innocent of any wrong doing and reinstated her position. She got a personal apology from Dr. Sachs that seemed a bit strained, and Madison knew she was still on tenter-hooks at work, but it

did feel good to be vindicated.

She spent her last few days before returning to work doing a lot of thinking and soul searching. She admitted to herself that she undeniably had strong feelings about Paige, and some level of attraction, which she still didn't understand, but she knew she had to remain at a professional distance.

Paige was just starting to heal and come out of her shell, and Madison was all too aware of the common occurrence for patients in her state to become overly attached and dependent on their therapists. It was only natural, given the circumstances, she reminded herself, and Madison made up her mind to go back to work and throw herself into her job whole heartedly, remain professional and to keep a healthy distance from Paige.

Her first day back, Madison walked onto the third floor wing and entered her office for the first time in weeks. She started by catching up on emails and phone calls, and called for a staff meeting for that afternoon so they could fill her in on what had been going on in her absence.

At the meeting, she heard from various staff about the goings on in the unit, the new patients, and any significant incidences. They discussed each patient briefly, giving her a summary of their progress and any issues that needed addressing.

She heard again and again from various staff how well Paige was doing.

"She's making remarkable progress,' Dr. Forbes eagerly reported. "She seems to have thrown herself into recovery this time around. She is far less withdrawn, she hasn't had an angry outburst since she came back...she's opening up in group and really showing a leadership ability there." Dr. Forbes said.

"How about the nightmares and self injury?" Madison asked, chewing on a pencil as she made notes.

"She's still struggling with night times, but no reports of self injury since she returned," Dr. Forbes said.

"She organized a volleyball team," Trisha said, smiling.

"A...volleyball team?" Madison asked, surprised.

"Yes, she and the other ladies have taken over the gym and hold competitions with other units in the hospital. I think they beat the men's unit on Friday, didn't they?" Dr. Forbes remarked. The other staff all nodded.

Madison just smiled.

After the meeting, she found herself wandering down the halls, consciously aware that she was seeking out Paige, telling herself it was just to check in on her. She finally found her outside on

the patio, sitting with several other patients. Madison watched from inside, unseen, as Paige talked to them animatedly, laughing and talking. She looked like a different person from the girl who had walked into Madison's office more than 6 weeks ago. Madison contented herself by watching her for another moment or two before walking away.

Later that afternoon, as Madison was preparing to leave for the day, there was a knock on her office door. She opened it and saw Paige standing there.

"Hey Doc...I heard you were back," Paige said, smiling easily. Madison smiled in return and opened the door, letting her in. She left the office door open, still feeling uneasy about being seen alone with Paige.

"Hey yourself...and yes, I am back, thanks to a certain someone," Madison grinned.

Paige looked around the office a little wistfully.

"So now that you're back...can I fire Dr. Forbes and come back to you?" she asked, jokingly.

Madison laughed. "No, I'm sorry...you know I wish I could but...well, I can't." Madison said, awkwardly. "But I hear great things from Dr. Forbes about you," Madison said, and Paige colored noticeably.

"All lies," she muttered, shyly.

"I highly doubt it," Madison said. "So how are you, really Paige? How are you sleeping?" she asked, concerned.

"A little better. I use the relaxation technique sometimes and it helps me go back to sleep after. Or...I draw," she shrugged. Madison mentally noted that both of those coping mechanisms were directly related to her.

"That's great! I'm glad those are helping you. Did you get your sketch book back?" she asked, feeling her stomach flip nervously at the memory of the drawings.

"Yeah, Sachs gave it back to me the next day. He even apologized," she said, looking smug.

"You really are talented, Paige."

"Only when I have such an inspiring subject," Paige said, meaningfully.

Madison ignored the comment.

"You should keep it up, Paige. Have you ever thought about doing something with that skill...art school? Web design?" she asked.

Paige shrugged. "Not really...I was always so focused on what my parents wanted me to do."

Madison nodded. "Have you heard from them?" she asked.

"I called them when I came back. My mother was upset, she didn't want me back here. But my dad actually stood up to her for once and said I could stay," she said, a small smile on her lips.

"That is great," Madison said, warmly.

"Yeah..." Paige said, as an awkward silence pervaded. She fidgeted with her hands and finally looked at the clock.

"I better go, we have practice in the gym in five minutes," she said, apologetically.

"I heard about the volleyball team," Madison smiled. "I was on my way home anyway...it was really good to see you, Paige."

"You too doc." Paige grinned. "See you around," she said, stuffing her hands in her back jean pockets and turning around. She walked out of the office and Madison sighed deeply.

Paige stood under the shower, letting the hot water beat down on her shoulders and neck. She felt sore all over but in a good way, after playing volleyball for two hours. It had been a good distraction as well, from her persistent thoughts that always went back to Madison. If she thought it was bad before, it was ten times worse now that the doctor was back at work.

Paige knew that if she was ever going to lead a normal life, she had to work through her issues and take advantage of the program she was in. After that night at the bar when she had seen Madison, Paige knew there was something there, something more than simply a doctor's care and concern. She had seen the fire in her eyes when she was dancing with Leah, not to mention the anguish when she kissed her. She had seen her hands tremble when she had to stop Paige from kissing her again...Paige replayed that moment over and over in her head. She had said, "If I let myself kiss you," not "If I let you kiss me." What if she hadn't stopped her?

She could sense the tension lying just under surface with her every time they spoke. It was as if they shared a secret but couldn't voice it aloud. Paige knew that after everything that had happened with the hospital, Madison would have to keep her distance. She knew it, and she didn't want to see Madison get into any more trouble over her. Paige was determined to focus on getting well enough to get out of here as soon as possible...she had a glimmer of hope and she wasn't going to let it go.

Still, as focused as she was, Paige ached to be closer to her, to see her. She saw the determination in Madison's eyes to remain professional and distant, and Paige understood it, respected it...but a small part of her still felt hurt by it. The wicked, playful side of her was determined to make it at least a little challenging for the doctor to remain so...cool and aloof. She was curious as to what

kind of reactions or responses she could get from Madison, and she was feeling more confident and bold every day. She smiled to herself in the shower as she thought of ways she could get to her.

She had her first chance without even meaning to. The next day coming back from the gym after another volley ball practice, Paige saw Madison in the doorway of the art room, standing and talking to a staff member inside. Paige walked down the hallway, slowing her steps until Madison's eyes caught her movements. Paige was hot and sweaty from the vigorous workout; her hair pulled back into a ponytail, and was wearing just a white tank top, sports bra, very short blue gym shorts, and sneakers. She held a water bottle in one hand and took a drink as she walked over to the doctor.

Madison, who had been talking to the art instructor, trailed off mid-sentence as she saw Paige approach

"Hi," Paige said, grinning, wiping her forehead off as she felt the sweat begin to drip.

"Hi," Madison said, visibly flustered, tearing her eyes away and looking back into the art room. She glanced back at Paige who was leaning against the wall, breathing hard. She looked just like she had in the gym that day.

"More volleyball?" Madison asked.

"Uh huh. We're playing against the men again tomorrow. You should come see the game," she said.

"I'd like that," Madison said. "Maybe I will. What time is the game?" she asked, keeping her voice casual and steady.

Paige watched Madison's cheeks color slightly and saw the doctor's fingers grip the doorframe next to her.

"Two o'clock tomorrow. In the gym," she grinned.

"Dr. Nichols?" the art instructor called out from inside the room, hoping to finish their conversation. Paige pushed herself off the wall.

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt," she said, quietly, "Maybe I'll see you at the game," she said to Madison, flashing a smile.

"I'll be there if I can make it," Madison promised

"Bye," Paige said, and turned and walked down the hall, a slight spring in her step. Madison

watched her for a moment before turning her attention back to the art room.

"Sorry Marci," she apologized. "Now, what were you saying?"

Madison didn't have any two o'clock appointments and she had promised to try to go to the game, so despite her own trepidations, she set off for the gym the next afternoon.

It turned out to be a lot more fun than she imagined. There was always the underlying nervousness she felt around Paige, but she was able to enjoy the game and watch her play with a kind of pure joy. Paige was obviously the leader of the team, shouting out directions and controlling the game. About halfway through the game, she scanned the room and spotted Madison sitting on the bleachers. She grinned and waved, and Madison couldn't help waving back at her, a surge of pride washing over her.

She couldn't be sure but Madison felt that after Paige saw her she played a little bit harder, showing off for her. She dove for balls that were far out of her reach, and hit the floor on her knees several times, with a loud thump that made Madison cringe. She couldn't help laugh at some of the plays and antics from the girl's team, and in the end they easily beat the men's team, who seemed unorganized and badly prepared.

As the players stood around congratulating each other, Madison made her way down to the court, praising all the girls for the good game. She came up to Paige finally, and smiled.

"Great game," she said. "You guys really showed up the men's team."

"Thanks. I'm glad you made it," Paige said, a volley ball stuck under one arm and a water bottle in the other. "Good job Maria. Good game, Cathy!" Paige called out to the other girls who were walking away.

"You seem cut out for the captains role," Madison said, a slight teasing note in her voice.

Paige scrunched her face up. "I never played sports back in school. I hated them. This is really kind of bizarre to me, believe me."

"So you weren't the cheerleader type?" Madison joked.

"Ug. Um, no..." Paige rolled her eyes. "I was more the scary "If you look at me wrong I'm going to kill you" dressed all in black type."

Madison laughed, not finding that hard to believe.

"I believe it," she said, smiling at Paige. "You played really well out there today," Madison said.

"It was fun to watch."

"The game or me?" Paige shot back.

Madison met her gaze. There was a feral sort of spark in those blue eyes and she felt her heart beat faster.

"Both," Madison said, after a pause. Paige seemed to take pity on her at this point, and bounced the volleyball in her hands down on the floor and caught it.

Madison turned and started walking away. She turned around and paused. "When's your next game?" she called out.

"Next Wednesday. Same time."

"I'll be there," Madison said, smiling, and turned to leave.

Despite the slight unease she felt from the last group session, Madison decided to attend the women's group therapy with Dr. Forbes again on Friday. There was a new patient and she wanted to see how she was acclimating to the program, and besides, as Chief, she needed to stay involved in all of the women's care.

Dr. Forbes started out the discussion by talking about learning new coping skills that they could use out in the real world, instead of falling back into familiar and easy negative patterns.

"Let's list some of our old coping devices, and why we used them" she said, asking for a volunteer to begin. Madison was more than a little surprised when Paige spoke up.

"I guess that hurting myself was a coping skill," she said, quietly. "My parents thought it was about suicide but it never was for me. It was like when the pain inside got to be too much, I had to let it out somehow, and cutting seemed like the only way sometimes. It made me feel good. Maybe because I was controlling it, the pain, and how it happened, and when it happened, instead of letting other people have that control, to hurt me."

"I cut myself just to feel something," Courtney said, jumping in. "My step dad molested me from the time I was five until I was fourteen...and I think I just felt so much shame, so dirty...I just switched off and didn't feel anything anymore. Cutting was the only thing that really made me feel something. I always thought I must have done something to make him do those things to me, so when I hurt myself it was like I was punishing myself."

"What does a 5 year old do to deserve that?" Paige burst out, indignantly. "You know you didn't do anything wrong to make him do that to you, don't you, Courtney?"

Courtney looked down, not answering. "I mean, he was just a sick bastard, and you didn't deserve what he did to you. It wasn't your fault, he was supposed to be your parent, a grown up. We all have to do what grown ups tell us to when we're five."

"Yeah but what about when I was twelve? Fourteen?" Courtney cried, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I could have stopped him then. I could have told," she cried.

"You were scared. And he probably threatened you," Paige said, the conversation suddenly hitting a little too close to home. Madison saw the pain in her eyes.

"It wasn't your fault. You just did what you had to do, to survive it. Right?" she asked, and Courtney nodded slowly. "You survived it, and he's rotting in jail. Don't let him continue to hurt you," Paige said. "He isn't worth it," she added, fervently. Courtney nodded, quietly sniffing.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Dr. Forbes interrupted. "So what are some new coping skills you have learned here, Paige? What do you do now to feel in control and deal with painful moments?"

Paige glanced up at Madison and back down.

"I...I learned that I don't really want to hurt myself. The men who...hurt me, and raped me, hurt me enough. I didn't deserve that either," she added, taking a deep breath. "What I really want is for the pain to go away. I just have to focus that in other ways. Like drawing. Or sometimes in my mind I go to a safe place, where nothing can hurt me, and even if I can't love myself I get...I get love and comfort from...there, and it helps me get through it until I am strong enough to love myself again," she said, softly, not looking up.

"That sounds wonderful," Dr. Forbes said, smiling. "Does anyone else have any healthy coping skills they've learned here?" she asked, and the group continued to talk. Madison was grateful that Dr. Forbes was running the meeting and she was just observing, since she didn't trust her voice at the moment, she was so overcome by Paige's transformation, and her words. Watching her walk the new girl through the first painful steps to recovery, Madison was astounded at her capacity for empathy, and her wisdom.

She thought back to the first few group sessions Paige had gone to, and the change was like night and day. She not only grasped the truth of her own recovery, but also helped those around her, despite the fact that her brutal attack was more than most of these girls could even fathom. Madison was in awe, as she watched Paige from across the room. She was so beautiful, inside and out, her spirit and determination so intense and resilient. She thought about Paige's parents, and her friends, and her ex-girlfriend, everyone who had turned their backs on this girl. And she pitied them. They would never know what a treasure they had given up.

Madison immersed herself in work over the next week. She stayed in her office most of the time, seeing patients and dealing with endless paperwork and emails. She avoided Paige, only nodding to her politely when she did see her, and pushed her as far from her mind as she could.

On Tuesday afternoon, Dr. Forbes came to her office asking to speak with her.

"Sure Sarah, come on in," Madison said, and Sarah sat down in a chair.

"I wanted to check with you about something, regarding Paige," she said. Madison looked up from her paperwork.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" she asked, instantly worried.

"No, she's doing wonderfully," Sarah said. "But she is still plagued by those nightmares and I worry about the long term effects of such a lack of sleep. She mentioned in our sessions that you tried the guided relaxation technique with her, and she really responded to it...I was wondering if you thought I should try exploring that more with her," Sarah said.

Madison felt a pang of jealousy go through her. That day that she had done the relaxation exercise with Paige was...a precious memory to her. She couldn't forget the peaceful, blissful look on Paige's face as she opened her eyes or the shy admission of where she had imagined herself feeling safest. She knew it was irrational but she almost didn't want to share that with Sarah. Was that a bad thing? Her mind rationalized that it would probably be healthy for her, but the other small voice inside her head was screaming out MINE!

Madison took a deep breath. "I think it is something that could benefit Paige, if she wants to try it with you," she said. "She seemed very responsive to it, and it may help the nightmares...I'm not sure. Have you discussed medication again with her?" Madison asked, keeping her voice cool and professional even though she was anything but on the inside.

"You know how she feels about that," Sarah sighed. "She won't even take a sleeping pill."

"Well I can hardly blame her. The last thing she wants is to fear that she won't be able to awaken from one of those nightmares," Madison said, shuddering as she recalled what the nightmares were like for her. She would give anything to take them away.

"I know, I just don't know what else to try," Sarah said. "I'll think I'll try the guided relaxation in our session tomorrow and see if it makes any difference. Thanks Madison." She smiled, and stood up.

"Sure. Good luck, Sarah," Madison said, ignoring the painful ache in her heart. It was ridiculous. She couldn't be Paige's doctor, and she wanted only the best for her. She was glad it was working out with Dr. Forbes. But deep down, though she wouldn't admit it even to herself, it still stung a little, knowing how well Paige was doing without her.

The next afternoon Trisha burst into Madison's office, interrupting her session with a patient. Madison looked up, irritated, until she saw the look on Trisha's face.

"What's wrong?" Madison asked, standing up.

"Dr. Forbes is asking for you...it's Paige," Trish said, and Madison pushed past her and out into the hall. She strode down the other end and straight to Sarah's office, not even needing to ask. She knew.

The door was open and she could hear Paige from down the hall.

"Stop! Please, don't...don't...oh god!!! No....please...please stop!" she was screaming between sobs. Madison pushed the door open, seeing Sarah standing back looking terrified and Paige on the floor, curled up in a ball, her eyes closed.

"What happened?" Madison asked, trying to control her anger.

"I...I don't know," Sarah said, her eyes wide with fear. "We were doing the relaxation exercise, and she started moaning and whimpering and then crying out...I tried to wake her and bring her back but it just wasn't working and she got louder and louder," Sarah said. "She kept saying your name so I sent Trish to go get you..."

"Madison!" Paige screamed in agony, her head banging on the floor as she writhed, her eyes still shut tight, and Madison had to take a deep calming breath.

"Ok...Sarah just keep everyone else out of here, please," Madison said firmly, and dropped down to the floor. She lifted Paige's head up, and cradled it in her lap.

"Paige, sweetie, shhh....listen to me. I'm here...it's Madison. Paige..." she had to pause, Paige groaning loudly, her entire body stiffening in some hidden torment.

"Paige, this isn't real. What you're feeling isn't happening, it's in the past. It's called a flashback, and it is just a memory, a body memory. It isn't real. Listen to my voice Paige... You are safe, I'm here."

She stopped again, bending down over Paige's head, fighting back her own tears as she heard Paige beg again for it to stop.

"Please make it stop, it hurts...help me please! Madison!"

"Paige, they can't hurt you anymore...it's all over. It happened a long time ago. Do you remember your safe place? I want you to go there, right now. You can get up and walk away from them

hurting you, and come to me. Come back to me Paige," Madison pleaded in her ear, her voice breaking, not knowing or caring if anyone else was in the room.

She felt Paige's muscles relax slightly, her screams fading, but she still moaned and seemed to struggle for air, her hands grasping at her throat.

"That's it...are you walking away from it? Good girl...keep breathing Paige, you can breathe...take a slow, deep breath, and come back to me, I am right here, I'm holding you, you are safe right here in my arms," Madison said, stroking her hair softly, and she felt a wave of relief as she heard Paige gasp and take a deep breath. "Good...breathe that air in and out and push all of that pain out of you, Paige...let it go, baby...it doesn't have to hurt you anymore, it's all over." She felt Paige breathe out and sob softly. She took several deep breaths.

Madison sighed, her body slumping. She continued to stroke her hair.

"Are you in your safe place, Paige?" she asked softly after a minute or so. Paige slowly nodded her head.

"You can stay there as long as you need to. I'm not going anywhere, I'm right here," Madison said, brushing the damp hair away from Paige's face, wiping the tears away with her thumb. She felt Paige's body slowly release all the tension and relax into her.

She leaned over, close to Paige's ear, and whispered.

"Paige, I want you to breathe in deep and feel the love fill you up. The air is warm, and loving, and peaceful, and gentle...breathe it in, let it fill up your chest and travel to every part of you, all the way down to your fingers and toes. Can you feel it?" she asked, and felt Paige's head nod slightly.

"When you're ready I want you to take another nice deep breath, and open your eyes...are you ready, Paige?" she asked, softly. After a few seconds, Paige nodded her head again.

"Ok, take a breath and let it out...that's it...and slowly open your eyes. You are safe, and I'm right here," Madison murmured, pulling her head back to look at Paige's face. She slowly blinked her eyes a few times, blinking up into Madison's eyes.

"Hi," Madison smiled down at her, through tears.

"Madison," Paige murmured her voice raw from screaming. "You really are here," she whispered, her mouth curling slightly into a smile. "I thought it was just my safe place talking to me," she said. "I guess I'm not that good at it yet," she joked, wincing as she felt her stiff muscles ache, her hand going to touch the back of her head where she had been banging it.

"Yes, I'm here," Madison said, stroking her hair again. "Do you remember anything that just happened?" Madison asked her, gently.

"Yeah. Everything," she said, pain filtering into her eyes. "It was so real and I really thought it was happening again...I could feel...everything," she said, sounding anguished. "But then you were there, I could see you, feel you...and I just...got up and walked away from them. And then I was in my safe place, like this," she said, looking down at Madison's lap where her head lay, "And all the pain disappeared, and I could breathe again, and...it felt so good."

Madison smiled at her. "I'm glad you came back to me," she said. "You had me worried for a minute."

"I'll always come back to you, Madison."

Madison glanced around the room for the first time. It was empty, thankfully.

She bent down and pressed a kiss to Paige's forehead. "I don't think you should do the guided relaxation with Dr. Forbes again," she said, half in jest. Paige smiled weakly back.

"I don't think so, no...I already told you, I only like hearing your voice anyway," Paige said.

"Are you ready to get up?" she asked Paige finally.

"Yeah, I think so." As she struggled to her feet, Paige let out a soft groan. "I feel like I've been run over by a Mack truck," she grumbled.

"Your body has been through a lot...I want you to go and rest," Madison admonished her.

"On your couch?" Paige teased.

"Not if you want me to come back to a job tomorrow," Madison said, smirking.

"Ok. Just checking," Paige said, with a bashful grin, as they walked over to the door.

"Madison," Paige said, stopping her before she opened it. Madison's heart skipped a beat, at the sound of her name from Paige's lips.

"Thank you...for everything, for coming for me and keeping me safe," Paige said, her face earnest and sincere. "Again."

Madison brushed her cheek with her fingertips lightly.

"Always," she vowed, and quickly opened the door and stepped out.

The volley ball game was the next day, and Madison showed up, wondering if Paige would be playing after what she had been through the day before. Sure enough, she was there, looking healthy and happy. The game was even more boisterous this time, probably because they played against an all staff team, and they proved more of a challenge than the last team. Paige, at the center of the action the entire game, made save after save. Madison thought her favorite part was watching Paige serve the ball. She looked so intent and serious, and hit the ball with such force, usually letting a little grunt out as she hit it with great effort. It made Madison smile every time.

The staff team won, but only by three points. Paige's team gave them a run for their money, and they all agreed to a rematch the following week.

Madison walked down and sought Paige out, hanging back and chatting with the other players until most of the crowd had gone. Finally she was alone, and Madison approached her.

"That was an exciting game," Madison said, smiling at Paige who was red faced, drenched in sweat and still breathing hard.

"No kidding! They kicked our asses," Paige laughed, as she clutched her side. "Ow...I am so gonna hurt tonight," she groaned.

"You held your own," Madison reassured her. "I was actually surprised to see you here, I thought you might not be up to it," she said, her tone speaking of the deeper concern she felt for Paige.

"I'm ok. I was sore but I actually slept all night," she said.

"Really?" Madison exclaimed, smiling. "That's wonderful. I was worried."

"You staying awake worrying about me at night, Doc?" Paige teased.

"Yes, yes I do. I can't help it," Madison said, defensively.

"I wasn't complaining," Paige said. "I think about you too," she added, softly.

Now Madison was speechless, wondering how their conversations always took a turn like this.

"I've got to go, I'm leaving early," Madison said, starting to turn to leave.

"Do you have a hot date?" Paige asked, playfully, but as Madison looked up at her she saw a glimpse of hurt on her face.

"No," she said slowly. "I'm going to my best friend Julia and her husband Todd's house for dinner and I promised I'd pick up a salad...it's the least I can do since I never cook for them," she said. She saw a look of relief cross Paige's face.

"Oh, ok. Have fun," Paige said, not able to keep the relief off her face.

"Thanks. Stay out of trouble!" Madison called behind her as she walked away.

Paige took to haunting the art room in the evenings, preferring it to watching the stupid TV shows the other girls liked to watch. She enjoyed working with her hands and tried out the clay, watercolors and acrylics, even beading necklaces just to keep busy. Slowly the other girls became curious and started following her lead, and pretty soon on any given night there were five or more of them goofing around in the art room. Paige was really warming up to the others in group and with the volleyball, so she didn't really mind.

"Paige, draw something for them!" Cathy pleaded one night, and after many protestations Paige finally gave in and sketched a portrait of Kris on the large poster paper. The girls were all duly impressed and pestered her until she drew one for everyone. After that she seemed to fall easily into the role of art teacher, giving advice and demonstrating techniques for the others, and Paige was amazed at how much she enjoyed it.

She was surprised when Madison asked her to meet her in her office one morning. Not that she minded any chance to spend time with her, but it was unexpected.

"What's up, Doc?" she asked, as she walked into the office.

Madison looked up and smiled. She looked more radiant, more glowing every time she saw her; she was a different person than the beaten girl she had first met.

"Don't "Doc" me," Madison chided, as Paige slipped into the chair across from her.

"Sorry...Madison," Paige corrected herself, letting the name roll off her tongue slowly.

"I hear you are the night shift art instructor around here," Madison remarked, tapping her pencil on the edge of her desk. Paige looked embarrassed and ducked her head.

"We're just bored and messing around," she said.

"I don't know...it seems you have quite the following," Madison smiled. "And the nurses have petitioned the Chief to let you paint a new mural in the hallway," Madison said. Paige's eyes widened.

"Really? But...I can't paint a mural," she blustered.

"I'm sure you can if you set your mind to it," Madison said, encouragingly.

"Is that why you called me in here?" Paige asked.

"No, actually...I had a review meeting with Dr. Forbes and the other staff yesterday and they are recommending that you be released soon," Madison said. "As head of the department, I have to approve of it..." she trailed off, trying to see how Paige would react to the news.

"Do you really think I'm ready?" Paige asked.

Madison smiled softly. "Yes, as much as I want to keep you here and know you are safe...I know you are, Paige. You have come so far, you are so strong. You deserve to go back out there and make a new life for yourself," she said, trying to keep the sadness out of her voice.

Paige simply nodded, looking thoughtful.

"Have you given any thought to what you'll do when you leave?" Madison asked.

Paige sat there, looking panicked at the thought of leaving the safety of the hospital.

"Not...really," she said, and Madison could see the fear in her eyes. She leaned forward in her chair.

"Paige," she said, "You don't have to leave right now. Just...start thinking about it. Preparing yourself for it. You can start making plans...will you...be going home?" Madison asked, cringing inside at the thought of her going back to live with her parents.

"I don't know," Paige said quietly. "I was thinking it might be time to bring them back for another meeting," Paige said, looking unhappy at the prospect.

"I'm sure Dr. Forbes can handle that, if that's what you want," Madison said, feeling the rage she felt for Paige's mother flare up inside.

"I was kind of hoping you could be there too," Paige said, glancing up pleadingly at Madison. The soft look in those pale blue eyes sent Madison's stomach plunge to her feet.

Good Lord, it's a damned good thing she doesn't know what that does to me, she thought, breathing deeply before answering.

"Of course I'll be there if you want," Madison said, seeing the relieved smile spread over Paige's face.

I just hope I don't end up killing your mother, she thought.

The meeting took place in Madison's office, since it was bigger than Dr. Forbes. Paige arrived early and paced back and forth, waiting for her parents to show up. Madison smiled sympathetically at her.

"Hey," she said, finally, standing up and walking over to Paige, putting a calming hand on her arm. "It's going to be alright. No matter what, you are strong and better than any of them put together. Ok?" she said.

Paige took a deep breath and seemed to draw strength from Madison's words and touch. She nodded.

Finally, Mrs. Randall arrived alone, along with Dr. Forbes. Paige sat next to Madison's desk and her mother sat a good distance away, Dr. Forbes separating her from Paige. She didn't attempt to greet her or come up to hug her before she sat down, Madison noted.

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Randall," Dr. Forbes said. "As I said on the phone, Paige asked for this meeting and I thought it was a good idea, as we are discussing her release in the near future," Dr. Forbes went on.

"It's about time," Mrs. Randall snorted. "I didn't even want her back here after the last incident. Two months in a mental hospital...well, I hope it was worth it. You need to hurry up to register for school if you want to get back in the fall," she said, glancing at Paige.

Paige didn't respond.

"So doctor, is she...cured?" Mrs. Randall asked, addressing Dr. Forbes.

Madison opened her mouth to speak but saw Paige shake her head slightly, her lips pursed.

Madison closed her mouth and sat back, her hands twisting together under the desk in frustration.

"As I said, Paige is ready to leave," Dr. Forbes said. "She has made remarkable progress and I am confident that she can succeed at anything she wants," Dr. Forbes said, smiling encouragingly at Paige.

"Yes well," Mrs. Randall sniffed. "I can see that you've had more luck with her than we have, and a damned sight better than her," she said, gesturing to Madison. "Paige was a wreck the last time we were here when she was under *her* care. I didn't think much of this program when I was

here last. And then she ran away, well, obviously *she* has no control over her patients. I must say I was happy to hear Paige had been transferred to a new doctor, I just don't think she was getting the treatment she deserved." Mrs. Randall glanced at Madison again. Dr. Forbes looked at Madison in shock. Before either of them could speak, Paige swiveled around in her chair to face her mother.

"Don't you dare talk about Madison like that, mom! You have no idea what you're talking about! She has done more for me in two months than you have my entire life! So just shut up!"

Mrs. Randall gasped. "Well! I see now how it is. We only want the best for you, Paige...why do you think we put you here in the first place? And now all you can do is attack us and defend your precious doctor? You don't honestly think she cares about you, do you? She gets paid to be nice and tell you everything you want to hear. At least I care about you enough to be honest with you," her mother said, with a righteous look of indignation.

"Honest with me? Oh, you mean like telling me that I was a worthless whore after I got raped? That I was crazy and would have been better off dead? That kind of honesty? Well, let me tell you something-I am glad I didn't die in that park. Because if I had I would have died believing you were right, that I wasn't worth anything more than that. And you were wrong. I *am* worth more than that. Nobody deserves to go through what I went through. And if I had died that night I would never have known what love was, because I certainly didn't ever know it from you." she said bitterly. Mrs. Randall blinked and looked at Paige blankly. Both doctors were speechless. Mrs. Randall stood up shakily and walked over to Paige. She pointed her finger at her. "Love? You think...what, that these people love you? You are still delusional then. You had better nip that sharp tongue of yours in the bud young lady. You can't speak to me like that and expect me to pay for all of this...this hospital...and live under my roof. You keep this up and you can forget about college, your car, your nice things. I have never seen such ingratitude in my life!" she said, angrily, her finger shaking at Paige. She moved forward as if to strike her.

Madison did the only thing she could think of and grabbed the back of the woman's jacket, pulling her back against the desk.

"Don't you touch her," she snarled. She let go immediately, seeing Dr. Forbes stand between Paige and Mrs. Randall.

Mrs. Randall spun around, facing Madison.

"Keep your hands off me! You and all your fancy diplomas, filling my daughters head with false hope and lies...you're just setting her up for disappointment and heartache! What she needs is to come home, go back to school and get her law degree. Settle down with a nice young man. If any nice young man will have her, now. She needs to face reality."

Madison contemplated if her job was worth not hitting the woman, but Paige stood up, distracting her.

"Mother," she said, calmly. "I am not coming home. I'm not going back to the law program. You can keep my college fund, my car and my room. I'm not worried about getting a nice man to settle down with. I'm gay, and if you knew me at all you'd have known that for a long time," Paige said, rolling her eyes. "So just...go home. I don't have anything else to say to you." she looked incredibly calm as she sat back down.

Mrs. Randall turned several shades of red. She looked at Dr. Forbes, and Madison.

"I see you've succeeded in brain washing my daughter and turning her against me. And probably turned her gay! I will sue the pants off this entire hospital."

"Mom, I knew I was gay long before I came here," Paige said with a heavy sigh.

Mrs. Randall turned around, looking at her in rage, Dr. Forbes still standing defensively in front of Paige.

"Well! Now it all makes sense! Of course!" she scoffed. "That's why those men did it, isn't it? It was because you are...*that* way, well what do you expect, Paige, when you go around flaunting that you're a god damned- lesbian?" She exploded.

Madison stood up, using every last ounce of her will power.

"Please leave my office, our patient says she has nothing more to say to you, Mrs. Randall. Dr. Forbes, would you please escort this woman out of the hospital before I call security?" she asked, not trusting herself not to hurt the woman. Dr. Forbes walked out quickly, following the ranting woman closely.

"She is my daughter! You will pay for this, all of you will pay for this," she screamed. "You will never practice again after I am through with you!"

Madison closed the door behind them. She let out a deep breath, looking up at Paige.

"That was unpleasant," she said.

Paige covered her face in her hands and began to cry. Madison walked over to her, sitting in the chair beside her.

"Paige...I'm so, so proud of you. I'm sorry that she said those horrible things to you," Madison said, but Paige looked up, shaking her head.

"I don't care about what she said about me. I know its all bullshit."

"Good! You're right sweetie, it was all bullshit. She's just ignorant and scared," Madison said, still trembling with rage.

"I'm upset because...she said those things to you," Paige cried, hiding her face again. "I wanted to hit her, I wanted to hurt her!" she cried, frustrated. Madison smiled, thinking how similar she felt toward the woman.

"Paige, she can't say anything to hurt me. I only hurt for you, because you deserve so much better than that. You didn't believe anything she said, did you...about the rape, or about being gay? Or about me?" Madison asked, her eyes filled with worry. "Because none of that was true."

"No. Of course not. She can't take this from me. I won't let her," Paige said.

"Good. I'm glad. Are you ok? With what you told her? What are you going to do now?" she asked Paige.

"I haven't thought that far ahead. I just know that I can't ever live with her again. But I have a few ideas," Paige said. "I hope she doesn't make any more trouble for you, I've already caused you so much trouble." She looked down, guiltily.

"Paige, you haven't caused any trouble," she said, lifting her chin up to look into her eyes. "You *are* trouble," she said with a soft laugh..."but I wouldn't trade any of it for anything in the world. You are..." her voice broke, the vivid blue eyes locked with hers making it difficult to speak.

"You are the most amazing, brave person I know, Paige. I feel blessed to know you," she said, swallowing hard and looking away, letting go of Paige's face.

Paige watched as Madison struggled to compose herself. Finally, she leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek.

"Thank you, Doc," she whispered, softly. She got up and walked out of the office.

The days flew by and Madison grew more and more depressed at the thought of Paige leaving.

She told herself it was because she was worried for her, and she was, but more than that, it was the thought of saying goodbye and never seeing her again.

When the day finally came, she had to drag herself to work, wishing she could just stay in bed and hide from reality. All the way to work, she kept having waves of nausea come over her, and a feeling of dread. When she arrived on the unit, she saw balloons and decorations in the main sitting room. All the patients and staff were inside, and Paige was there too, talking and laughing with one of the other girls. Madison stood outside watching, trying to steel herself, until Paige's eyes flickered to the window and she saw her. The smile on her face slowly faded as she saw Madison watching her.

Madison forced a quick smile and waked into the room. She stopped to talk to Trisha and some of the other staff, avoiding Paige for the moment. Finally, she wandered over to her, standing by the large cake on the table. It said "Good Luck Paige" written in blue icing. Paige looked beautiful in a white lace sleeveless shirt and black slacks.

"So, you get a farewell party huh?" Madison said, trying to sound playful.

"I guess so," Paige replied. "I didn't know that you would all be so happy to see me leave that you'd throw a party," she teased.

Madison looked at her reproachfully.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

Paige looked down at her hands, looking nervous. "I'm...scared," she admitted. "But yeah, I'm ready," she said, slowly.

"You're going to be great," Madison assured her, smiling over at her.

"Do you have somewhere to go?" Madison couldn't help ask, concerned.

"Yeah," she said. "Leah's going to let me stay with them for a while, just till I get back on my feet."

"Good," Madison said, relieved.

"So...gonna miss me?" Paige asked, nudging Madison on the arm. Madison felt tears spring to her eyes in response and furiously fought them back, horrified.

"Are you kidding? You're a pain in the ass," she quipped.

Paige didn't reply, smiling sadly.

Cathy and Kris came over then and started talking to Paige. Madison slowly slunk away from the table and went to mingle with the other patients.

After a few minutes, Madison felt her armor fading and slipped from the room, going to her office to hide in peace and quiet. She absorbed herself in email, trying to ignore the ache inside her chest.

An hour later, she heard a knock at her door. She heard her own voice quaver as she told them to come in. Trisha opened the door and peeked in.

"Hi Dr. Nichols. Paige asked me to give you this before she left," she said, walking over to the desk and handing Madison an envelope. She looked down at the doctor, who took the envelope.

"She left?" Madison asked, shocked and hoping her face didn't give her away.

"She left about 10 minutes ago," Trish said. "I'm happy for her but I'm going to miss that smile around here," she said, sounding emotional herself.

"Yeah. Me too. Thanks, Trish" she said. The nurse left the office, closing the door behind her.

Madison felt as though she had been kicked in the gut. She didn't know whether to be relieved that she didn't have to say goodbye to Paige, or sad...or angry. She felt a little of all.

She looked down at the envelope, afraid. She wasn't sure if she was up to reading a letter and god knows what Paige might have written.

She finally worked up the nerve to tear it open. She pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it. It wasn't a letter at all. It was a sketch.

The drawing was of Madison holding Paige, a tender look on her face, Madison's fingers brushing Paige's cheek, and Paige looking up at her with such a look of...love and devotion. It was a beautiful drawing, capturing the bond between them perfectly. At the bottom of the paper were the words: Always, Paige

Madison let the tears fall now, now that it was all over. She put the sketch down and buried her face in her hands, crying, letting the pain that had been held inside for so long finally come out.

"You know they have lesbian chat rooms," Julia said, clicking on her laptop at the kitchen counter, while Madison stirred the soup on the stove for her.

"Maybe we should go into one and you can hook up with someone," she grinned at Madison.

"Oh please! Don't torture me," Madison groaned. "I don't think I'm ready for lesbian cyber sex," she said. Julia looked a little disappointed, but let it drop.

"Ok...but we have to get you out there! You need a good-"she broke off, glancing at her friend warily, seeing her eyes narrow threateningly.

"Well...you need a good...friend," she finished, lamely.

"I have a good friend. You." Madison said stubbornly.

"Yeah well that's not exactly the type of friend I meant...I was thinking more along the lines of a friend with benefits," Julia smirked.

"I'm fine, Julia...I'm not interested in that."

Julia peered at her friend closely.

"You're still thinking about that girl aren't you?"

"What girl?" Madison asked, innocently, and then sighed.

"Ok I know which girl. And yes...I think about her, I just worry." She said, wistfully. It had been a month since Paige had left Palo Alto, and Madison hadn't heard a thing, not that she was expecting to. She tried to be happy about it, for Paige, but it was hard. Especially when she missed her so god damned much.

"I don't know...I've never seen you this way before Maddie," Julia said, looking perplexed.

"What way?"

"All...googly eyed and love sick."

"I am not googly eyed and love sick!" she said, hitting Julia lightly on the arm. "And I have been this way. Lots of times. Not that I am this way," she argued.

"Name one time," Julia said.

"Well..." Madison thought, "There was Bill. Billy, remember him? The guy from star bucks? I was all over him."

"For like, two days, until he got too clingy and you dumped him." Julia reminded her. Madison

scowled.

"What about Steve?"

"Steve was gay!" Julia said, accusingly.

"Yeah but I didn't know it when I was hitting on him..." she trailed off. She really didn't have a very impressive track record. And if she was really honest with herself, not that she'd admit it to Julia, but even when she'd had what she considered good sex, none of them had ever made her insides feel the way Paige did when she kissed her.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway," Madison said at last, pouring more wine. "I'm not interested in dating anyone...male or female!" she said, firmly.

Julia looked at her, pensively.

"This girl...she's ok now?" she asked.

"Ok? I hope so. I mean yes, she is," Madison corrected herself.

"And she's not your patient anymore?"

"Nope."

"And she's not a patient at the hospital anymore, right?"

"Right..."

"And she's legal, right?"

Madison laughed. "Yessss...What is your point, Julia?"

Julia shrugged innocently. "Just askin."

"You're cute. But she...she is just starting to live Julia. She's so young...and she needs to do her own thing now. I have no place in her life."

"She liked you though."

"She didn't have a choice!" Madison sighed, getting irritated. "I was all she knew! Her world became this tiny bubble and I was the only thing there for her to latch onto. Of course she liked me. She's out in the real world now and...she's going to meet lots of new people and have many, many people to choose from." She swallowed hard, ignoring the sharp pain in her heart at the thought. "She will forget about me and move on. And so will I," she said, sipping her wine. Julia didn't reply, but took over stirring the soup she was cooking with a skeptical look on her face.

She didn't voice it but inside her head, Julia thought it sounded like Madison was trying to convince herself, more than her.

Working at a bookstore was never her idea of a dream career, but Paige found she enjoyed working with people and being out in the world again. She worked day shifts so she didn't have to worry about walking anywhere at night. It was only a mile from Leah's apartment, so she didn't have to worry about a car either, which was good, since her parents hadn't spoken to her since the incident at the hospital and she had no car.

And the bookstore was a queer bookstore, which made the books- and the clientele more interesting. She enjoyed watching the cute gay boys come in and buy kinky magazines, and the shy, red-faced young baby dykes wander in trying to look inconspicuous as they peeked into lesbian erotica books and then left the store with a rainbow bumper sticker instead.

Paige hit it off right away with the store owner. His name was Rob and he was as big a queen as they came. His partner Dan was the book keeper for the business, and was definitely the Butch in the relationship, and the two of them together always made Paige laugh. Rob hired Paige on the spot when she walked into the store, knowing that with her looks and those eyes, she would draw more women into the store than a bee to honey.

One afternoon about two months after she started working there, on her lunch break, Paige sat in the back of the store sipping on her Dr. Pepper and sketching. It seemed like no matter how many drawings she did, there was always an element to it that reminded her of Madison. Sometimes it was something minor, almost imperceptible, like the slender arch of her neck, the way her nose crinkled when she grinned, her cute little earlobes or the shape of her eyes...but there was always something there.

This sketch was different than anything she'd ever drawn before. Two women naked, their limbs intertwined, in a passionate kiss. It was highly erotic, and Paige felt her ears burn as she shaded in the contours of their breasts and drew curly dark hair between the legs of the woman on bottom. As Rob entered the break room, Paige quickly turned the sketch book face down on the table and pretended to be interested in her sandwich that had lay untouched for the last 20 minutes.

"What's that?" Rob asked, nosily, as he opened a diet coke and sat down at the table beside her.

"Nothing," Paige answered, putting her hand on the sketchbook protectively.

"What are you hiding?" Rob asked, grinning. "Come on Paige, lemme see it!" he whined.

Paige rolled her eyes. "Ok...but NO laughing. It's just a hobby I picked up...recently," she said,

her face coloring.

"Oh goody!" Rob practically squealed, clapping his hands. He picked it up and turned it over.

He looked for several long moments, and then let a low whistle escape his lips.

"Damn girl! This is gorgeous! Of course, it would be better if it was two men but...this is really hot!" he grinned, looking up at her. "Can I look at the others?" he asked, seeing that the book was almost filled.

"Sure, sure," Paige mumbled, embarrassed. Rob flipped back to the front and started leafing slowly through the pages. He glanced up at Paige every now and then, as if seeing her for the first time. Finally, he set it down.

"Those are amazing! You really have a gift," he said, sincerely. "I bet the girls would love this stuff," he added, excitedly. His whole face lit up then.

"Oh. My. God. You have to put some of these up in the display window! Lesbians dig hand-made art and stuff...and this will really make them stop and look twice...and then, when they come inside and ask about them and see you..." he rubbed his hands together greedily. "Bam! We got 'em." He declared, looking at her triumphantly.

"Rob," Paige said, warningly. "I can't! These are...my drawings...and it's not real art, it's just...doodling," she protested.

"Not real art! Honey, you don't know what real art IS. This is it, the real deal. And we don't have nearly enough queer artwork in here, it's hard enough to come by," he complained. "Most of it is just raunchy but this," he glanced down at her sketchbook. "This is ART." He said, dramatically.

Paige squirmed uncomfortably. "I don't know Rob," she argued.

"Just put a few in the window and see what happens. You don't even have to tell anyone who drew them if they ask, just see what the reaction is, first," Rob wheedled.

"Alright! But only a few...and I am choosing what goes in there. Some of these are...private," she said, scowling.

Rob beamed, and stood up, leaning over to kiss the top of her head.

"Thank you. You wait and see...the public is going to be begging for more. We have frames in the storage room if you want to frame them first, or matte them on a board," he offered cheerily.

"Ok, I'm going back out front to relieve Dan. He hates having to deal with people."

Paige opened her sketchbook to the front page and stared at the first sketch for a few moments before closing it again.

"I miss you," she whispered.

"Bookstore named Desire," Paige said automatically, answering the phone.

"Can- can I speak to Paige Randall?" a man's voice said.

"Dad?" Paige asked, incredulous. There was a long silence.

"Hi honey," he said, finally.

"How did you get this number?" she asked, a little annoyed.

"Leah gave it to me, I called over there. I'm sorry to bother you but I just...wanted to say hi. I miss you." he said, haltingly. This was probably more than he had ever said to Paige her entire life, and she sat there speechless for a few moments.

"I miss you too, dad," she finally said.

"Your mother told me about what happened at the hospital," he said. "I'm sorry Paige. I don't know what happened to her...somewhere along the way she changed from the woman I first met and fell in love with. It's no excuse for the way I let her treat you and...I'm sorry."

"Adam misses you too," he added. Paige thought about her brother stuck in that house and shuddered. "Tell Adam...tell him I said hi," she said, not sure what to say.

"Can I come and see you? Just for a few minutes," her dad asked, hesitantly. He didn't expect her to agree but he had to ask.

"Sure. I'm here at the bookstore most days. You can stop by anytime," she said.

"Ok I'll come by tomorrow and see you," he said.

"K. bye dad," Paige said, and hung up the phone.

When her father walked into the store the next afternoon, Paige felt nervous, both to see him again and for his reaction to what kind of store she worked in. He came over to the counter and gave her a hug.

"You look good," he said, nervously.

"Thanks. I am good, dad," she said, smiling.

"You like working here?" he asked, looking around.

"Yes, I love it actually. The guys who run it are really nice," she said.

"Guys?" he asked. She thought she detected a note of protectiveness in his voice, which made her smile.

"Yes...two men, who are lovers, own this store," she said, and he looked relieved.

"Oh! I see, well...that's nice, honey," he said. There was an awkward silence, and then her dad looked like he was bursting to speak. Finally, Paige couldn't stand it any longer.

"What is it dad? You look like you're about to implode. Spit it out," she teased him.

"I just...I just wanted to say that I am sorry. For...everything. For not being there when you needed me most," he said, his voice breaking. Horrified, Paige realized he looked like he was going to cry.

"Um...let's go in the back room, ok?" she asked, glancing around the store. She led him back to the break room and gave Rob a pleading look as she passed him, mouthing "Sorry" as she went by. He nodded and went up front to cover for her.

In the break room, Mr. Randall sat on a chair and wiped at his eyes, trying to recover. He finally looked back at his daughter who was watching him with a worried expression.

He took a deep breath, and tried again. "I have never been good at talking, Paige, and your mother...she makes it hell for anyone who doesn't agree with her. But that is no excuse...I am your father, I am supposed to protect you, and not only did I fail to do that but even afterwards, I wasn't there for you. I don't blame you if you never want to talk to me again, but I hope...I hope I can be a part of your life, someday," he said.

Paige was reeling from this outpouring of emotion from a man she had hardly ever heard boo from, but she overcame the shock quickly.

"Dad...it isn't your fault, what happened to me. It was nobody's fault, except the men who did it. I don't blame you, and I do know how hard it can be with mom. Of course I forgive you and want you in my life...just, don't expect too much yet. And don't expect me to talk to mom, I don't think I will ever be able to do that." Paige said, putting her hand on his. He reached out and hugged her, unable to speak yet. When they pulled away, Paige had tears in her eyes, too.

"I will always need my dad," she said. "No matter how old I get."

"Adam wants to see you too. He is actually playing basketball in school...I know he'd love it if you came to a game. And don't worry, your mom never goes to the games," he assured her.

"I'd love to," Paige smiled. They talked for a while, steering the subject to lighter and less painful territory, until they were laughing and talking about old times. Finally Paige looked at her watch.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go back out front, Rob is supposed to be off by now," she said. He followed her back out front. Rob was ringing up a customer, and when he saw Paige he grabbed her and dragged her over.

"This is the "in house artist,"" he declared, proudly. The woman he was helping smiled at Paige.

"I was just admiring the drawings in the window," she said. "They are really beautiful...are they for sale?" she asked.

Paige felt her ears grow hot with embarrassment. Especially since her dad was still standing beside her.

"Um, thanks! Yes, those are for sale..." she said, hesitantly. The woman's face lit up.

"Great! How much are they?" she asked, eagerly. Paige looked at Rob.

"I don't really know," she said. "Ten dollars each?" she suggested, unsure if she was asking too much.

"Ten each! Oh no...I couldn't pay that for them," the woman said, and Paige felt horrified.

"I hadn't really thought about it...whatever you think is fair," she stammered.

The woman saw the flustered girl and laughed. "I meant it wasn't asking enough," she said, and Paige saw Rob nod emphatically.

"I'd like to buy all three drawings...how does...150.00 sound?" she asked.

"Oh, I couldn't! I mean, they're just sketches."

"They're really unique, and I think they are worth more than that," the woman said, frankly.

Paige blushing accepted the woman's check and thanked her profusely, and when she left, Rob was beside himself with glee.

"I told you so!" he crowed, patting her on the back.

"What was that all about?" her dad finally asked.

"Ohhh, Rob talked me into putting some of my drawings up in the display," Paige said, shyly.

"She is incredibly talented," Rob sighed happily. "She should probably be going to art school or

something, but I need her here too much to complain," he grinned. "Ok hon, see you tomorrow," Rob said, kissing her on the cheek and leaving the shop.

"You always did like to color," her dad said, smiling at her. Paige felt her cheeks grow hot, hoping he didn't ask to see any of her drawings.

"Yeah, I guess I did," she admitted.

"Ok...see you at the game on Friday?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I'll be there," she said, and hugged him goodbye.

As she worked on inventory, Paige decided it had been a very interesting day. Very interesting indeed.

It seemed like behind every turn there was a ghost waiting to jump out at her. The office. The gym. The mural in the hallway, with bright colorful paintings of women and abstract images. Every time she looked at it something new jumped out at her. Something that reminded her of Paige.

Madison felt it wearing her down, day by day. Where once, work was her entire life and something she thrived on, lived for, it was now a drudgery, something to get through, just to make it till the end of the day. New patients came into her life, and she did her best to focus on them, help them, but her heart wasn't in it. Then again, she mused, maybe that was a good thing. Her heart had gotten "in it" before and now look at her!

She knew it would be hard, but she never dreamed that three months later she would still be this miserable. She had even dragged Julia back to that bar, just with the hope that Paige might show up there...crazy, she knew, and of course she hadn't, and Madison had been miserable company that girl's night out.

Julia kept pestering her to move on and explore the possibility that she might be gay. She even offered to set Madison up with a friend of hers from work...a female friend! Madison coolly declined.

Sitting in her office alone, Madison sighed and pathetically opened up her filing cabinet. She pulled out Paige's file, and opened it, just to look. Of course there was nothing in there that she didn't already know. And most of it was things she didn't want to remember...medical reports from the rape, records of the "incidents" she'd had while at Palo Alto. That all seemed so far away from the person she knew Paige was becoming now. There was a photo, taken of her when she first arrived. The hospital took Polaroid's of each patient when they arrived, just for the records and in case any sort of identification was needed in an emergency. Madison ran her

fingers over the poor shot of the surly, angry girl that had first walked into her office. She hardly recognized her, she was so thin and unhappy looking. But it was still her. She gazed at it for a long time before putting the file away with a heavy sigh.

She knew she needed to do something to change her life, she just didn't know what. Her work was suffering and she hated being anything less than 100% committed to anything. The truth was, she just didn't want to be here anymore. She still hadn't gotten over the way the entire staff had turned on her when she had been put on administrative leave. From the icy stares and whispers behind her back, she knew there were still some of her co-workers who thought ill of her. It wasn't even as though they thought she had simply mismanaged a patient...the idea that these people really thought that she had...done something inappropriate, with Paige...made her furious.

Even Jeff, for all his apologies and friendliness since the board meeting, still seemed cool with her. There were no more invitations for happy hour drinks or lunch together. Even with her name cleared, Madison's reputation and image was severely injured and she was tired of fighting a battle she could never win.

After a week of thinking long and hard over the decision, Madison walked up to Jeff's office one afternoon and asked his secretary if she could see him.

"Madison! What a nice surprise," he said as he let her in. She walked into his office, feeling ill as she remembered her last visit here.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, as they both sat down.

"I'm handing in my two weeks notice, Jeff," Madison said, handing him her letter of resignation.

"What? But...why, Madison? After everything that happened, you fought so hard to stay. And your name was cleared." He objected.

"My name may have been cleared but my reputation hasn't been. It's not just that Jeff, I need a change, and I want something more in my life than work. I'm going to open my own practice." She said.

Jeff sighed heavily and took the letter. "I'm sorry to see you go Madison. Despite recent events, I really do admire you," he said. She nodded curtly and stood up.

"Thanks, Jeff. I appreciate that." She walked out of the office, feeling freer than she had in years.

"Julia, is there any reason we're going on the freeway to go get a cup of coffee?" Madison asked, looking over at her friend suspiciously. Julia grinned, as she changed lanes and continued to head

north on I-5.

"I said we were going for coffee...I didn't specify *where* we were going for coffee," she said, maddeningly. Madison groaned and sat back, knowing she might as well just go along with it. Whenever Julia got one of her brilliant ideas, nothing stood in her way. When they exited the freeway downtown and turned up Broadway, Madison soon realized where they were headed. Capitol Hill. The Gay district.

"Julia, you really are funny, you know that?" she asked, exasperated. "So now that you think I'm gay, I can only drink coffee at..." she looked around as they Julia pulled into a parking spot. "At the Rainbow coffee house? Couldn't any of the hundreds of coffee shops in your neighborhood have sufficed?"

Julia laughed and got out of the car. "Come on, it'll be fun. We'll go flirt shamelessly with the cute little dykes serving coffee." Madison couldn't help think it was unfair that Julia not only enjoyed this sort of thing more than her but that she would probably get hit on more than her. Her bubbly personality drew attention in ways that Madison's own quiet, reserved personality never could.

Once seated and sipping her "gay" coffee, Madison admitted it did have a friendly atmosphere. She enjoyed observing the unique people that frequented the coffee shop. Definitely not the type that she would see at her local star bucks. There were piercings, tattoos, pink hair, chain collars and metal spikes every which way she turned. She felt out of place though, and pondered again why she let Julia do these things to her. As they left the coffee place, Madison headed toward the car, but Julia grabbed her hand and pulled her the other direction.

"Maddie! C'mon, loosen up. Let's go explore. I've always wanted to go and look around Toys in Babe land!" she said, excitedly.

"Oh god Julia, are you dragging me into a sex shop?" Madison demanded.

"Yes! If you won't go find a hot woman to relieve you, then you should at least own a good vibrator," she said firmly, still dragging her by the hand. They walked down the street, passing all kinds of stores, and Madison noticed couples- mostly same-sex couples, walking around, holding hands. She even saw an older couple, two cute grey haired women sitting outside a café and kissing. It was like she had walked into a whole different universe, and yet it was 15 minutes from her house. It was almost surreal.

Not nearly surreal as what she saw next. Trailing behind Julia now, walking slower to take in all the new sights, Madison's gaze wandered past a window display. There were all kinds of gay and lesbian posters, book titles like "The Butches of Madison County," which amused her, and every kind of rainbow paraphernalia one could hope for.

And then there was a framed drawing in black and white that jumped out at her. She stopped in her tracks and stepped closer. The drawing was of two women in bed together, their hands clasped in each others, fingers intertwined, above their heads, one lying on top of the other. It

wasn't so much that the image itself was familiar, but the style. And the woman on top looked eerily like...her.

Madison peered closer now, looking for any other details...a name, a signature, a label saying if it was a reprint of some sort. But there was nothing. Her heart skipped a beat, as she looked from the drawing back to Julia who was now half a block ahead of her. Madison glanced back at the drawing once more and then ran to catch up with Julia.

"Julia!" she panted. You have to come back there with me."

"Where?" Julia asked, looking back from where Madison had come from.

"A Book Named Desire? Huh...that's a cute name! Is it like a gay porno store?" she asked, looking keen all of a sudden.

"No...I mean I don't really know. Just come with me," Madison urged.

"Ok, but don't think you are distracting me from our ultimate goal...toys!" Julia said firmly, as Madison led the way back down the hill to the bookstore.

The bell rang as she pushed open the door. Madison walked in, looking around the store. She glanced at the other customers, browsing bookshelves and lounging on the couches reading. Her eyes darted to the check out counter, and she saw a man behind the cash register. She quickly walked over to him.

"Can I help you ladies find something?" the man asked.

"Yes I...I was wondering who drew that sketch in your display window," Madison asked him.

"Oh, is there still one up there? They sell out so quickly I'm surprised," he remarked. "Were you interested in buying it?" He asked, always eager to reel in a sale.

"Who is the artist?" Madison asked again, as Julia came up next to her, looking curious.

"I'm sorry, she would prefer not to give out her name, but if you'd like to see some of her other drawings I could probably arrange it if you'd like to come back another time," Rob said, starting to feel concerned as he watched the expression on the woman's face turn from anxious to angry.

"Please," Madison said, trying to temper her desperation, "I really need to know who it is. I'll buy the drawing, if that would help," she added quickly.

Rob pursed his lips and looked thoughtful. "How much would you pay for it?" he asked, his greed getting the better of him.

Madison leaned forward, over the counter, holding his gaze. "It is priceless to me. I would pay anything, anything at all." She said in a low, serious voice.

"Um, Madison?" Julia piped in, looking worried. "What's going on?"

"Nothing Julia...it's ok," Madison responded, not breaking eye contact with Rob. Rob, feeling more and more uneasy, finally looked away.

"Tell you what. Hold that thought for just a second," he said, and without waiting for a response he disappeared into the back of the shop.

Rob walked quickly to the break room, practically skipping.

"Paige!" he shouted as he walked in, startling her so badly that she spilled her soda all over her jeans.

"Damn it Rob! Don't DO that!" she yelled, wiping herself off with napkins. "What is it?" she demanded, glaring at him.

"Ok...get this. There is a woman out there who really likes your drawing. She said she would pay anything I asked for it. Anything!" he gushed, his eyes sparkling like a kid on Christmas morning.

Paige raised her eyebrow. "Anything? That's...odd. Like, she'd pay a million dollars for it?"

"She said it was priceless to her," he said, shrugging. "Actually she was kind of scaring me, she insisted on knowing who the artist was, and when I said I couldn't tell her she got pretty agitated." Paige wrinkled her nose and gave him a perplexed look.

"Why the hell does she care who did it?" she asked. Rob shrugged.

"I don't know. But I thought maybe...if you wouldn't mind...you could go out and meet her! Do you have any other sketches done yet?" he asked, glancing around.

"No, I don't...you work me too hard," Paige accused. She sighed heavily. "Ok, ok, I see how much this means to you. I'll go out there. But if she turns into some crazy stalker, I am going to kick your ass," she warned him, as he thanked her profusely and followed her out to the front.

She emerged from the doorway and looked up to see Madison, right before her eyes.

Paige stopped so suddenly that Rob walked into her, painfully shoving her forward a step. Paige blinked. She still couldn't believe her eyes. Her face melted from shock into a slow smile, ignoring Rob's whines about stopping in the middle of the doorway.

"Madison?" she said, her feet finally working again as she stepped forward and approached the counter. Madison, on the other side of the counter, looked just as shocked.

"I knew it was you," Madison said, smiling.

"What are you- how did you know?" Paige asked, walking, around the counter.

"I just," Madison stammered, looking over at Julia and trying to think of a way to explain why they were here. "We came for gay coffee" didn't sound right somehow.

"We were just headed to Toys in Babeland and then Maddie dragged me in here," Julia supplied helpfully.

Madison turned her head and glared at her with enough threatening power to make Julia feel almost bad. "I'm sorry!" she mouthed, and then turned to Paige who was now approaching them, looking highly amused.

"You must be Julia," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm Paige," she said, as they shook.

"Paige! Well...it's nice to finally put a name to the moping," Julia said. She felt a kick on her ankle from behind her as Madison silently raged, and Paige had the good grace to simply smile.

"I'm going to go browse the lesbian sex books...I'll let you know if I find anything interesting," Julia said to Madison, beaming at her friend who was now rather red in the face. She walked away, finally leaving Madison and Paige face to face.

"I'm sorry about her," Madison began. Paige moved closer and hugged her fiercely. Madison stopped talking and held her, closing her eyes and feeling her heart banging so hard she thought Paige would be able to feel it. It felt so...so....good. Madison breathed her in, remembering the scent of her, and she suddenly didn't want to let go.

Finally, Paige pulled away.

"Hi" Madison said, drinking her in with her eyes. She couldn't believe it was really her.

"Maddie?" Paige teased, an eyebrow raised.

"Oh god," Madison groaned. "Only Julia gets away with that. Besides don't you have enough nicknames for me already?"

Paige laughed. "Yeah, I guess I do. Doc," she said, smiling softly. "It's so good to see you," she said, sighing happily. Madison shook her head in disbelief.

"It's unbelievable seeing you...I can't even tell you," she said, realizing she sounded like an idiot, but not particularly caring. "You look so good!" Madison said, looking her up and down.

Paige had, if anything, only blossomed even more in the months since she had seen her last. She had put on more weight, looking healthy and toned. Her hair was a few inches shorter with layers added, but still long, glossy and beautiful. Her eyes were as blue as ever. She wore a soft pink shirt, and dark blue jeans. Madison felt frumpy in her favorite pair of faded and ripped jeans and black thermal shirt.

"You look good too," Paige said, "I've never seen you dressed so casual!" she exclaimed, in surprise. "Well, unless you count PJ's," she added.

"I don't think you can get more casual than that," Madison said, feeling the heat rise to her face. She glanced over at Julia who had her nose buried in a book but was peering over the top of it every five seconds.

"God, she is a pain in the ass," Madison muttered.

"I thought I was the pain in the ass," Paige said, pouting. Madison's stomach did a flip as she watched Paige's lower lip jut out. She quickly tore her eyes away.

"Don't worry. You are," she assured her. "I'm sorry about not saying goodbye. It was just..." she sighed. "It was hard."

Paige nodded, her pout fading into a more genuine troubled face.

"I'm sorry, Madison, I should have come said goodbye. I guess I couldn't either."

"Thank you for your going away present," Madison said. "It was beautiful."

Paige blushed and looked down at her hands in the same endearing way she always had. Madison felt a painful pang in her chest.

"So you're a paid artist now, eh?" Madison said, steering the conversation to safer waters.

"Oh, not really...Rob- the owner, the one you talked to, talked me into putting them out there. I've sold a few."

"I'll bet. That's really wonderful. I always said you were talented, Paige. So talented," Madison said, enthusiastically.

"Yes, you did. You were the first," Paige said. "The first one to tell me that."

"So you work here, too?" Madison asked, trying to calm her pounding heart.

"Yeah, part time. I'm taking classes at the Art Academy downtown so Rob let me cut my hours back," she said.

"Art school? You're doing it?" Madison exclaimed, her mouth dropping open in excitement.
"Paige, that's fantastic!"

"Thanks. I'm really loving it. I'm learning so much, even how to make art on computers...my dad is sending me to school there."

"Your father?" Madison croaked.

Paige nodded, smiling. "Yeah, we had a heart to heart a few weeks ago. I even went to see my brother play basketball last week," she said.

Madison was overwhelmed. "That is...so great, Paige. I'm so glad," she said, not knowing how to describe in words how happy. But Paige knew.

"Yeah, it was unexpected to say the least. But he actually broke down and cried...can you imagine?" she asked getting an emphatic shake of the head from Madison.

"Here at my work! He felt really bad about everything that had happened and...well it was a good moment," Paige said.

"And your mom?" Madison asked, not even wanting to mention her.

"Oh god no!" Paige said, shuddering inwardly. "No, I haven't talked to her, and I won't. Dad knows that. He doesn't blame me in the least. I bet she is throwing a huge fit over Art school," Paige laughed. "If he even tells her."

"I think it's so great that he is doing that for you," Madison said. *Finally...someone is treating her right*, she thought, her heart aching again as she thought of the way Paige had been treated.

"How about you? How's the hospital?" Paige asked.

"I wouldn't know," Madison said.

"Oh god they didn't...fire you did they?" Paige asked fearfully, thinking it was somehow her fault.

"No no, sweetie," Madison said before she could stop herself. She grimaced at the use of the endearment, somehow seeming out of place now, after all this time apart, but went on. "I quit! I just didn't have it in me anymore."

Not after you, she thought.

"I have my own private practice now, out of an office," she said.

"Wow...is that a good thing?" Paige asked, stunned.

"Yes. I have more free time now...I'm my own boss, so no more kissing up to Dr. Sachs. It's a very good thing." Madison smiled. Paige beamed.

"Then congratulations. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks," Madison said. There was an awkward silence, as they both struggled for what to say next.

"I should probably get back to work," Paige said, looking around at the store.

"Still want the drawing?" she teased. "And are you really going to pay anything for it?"

Madison laughed, looking sheepish. "I did get a little impulsive earlier...I just needed to know if it was you," she said, apologetically.

"Impulsive can be good," Paige remarked, innocently enough, but Madison's eyes widened at the brazen comment.

"Besides, I already have what I consider the masterpiece of the artist's collection" Madison said. "I don't think I can ever top it."

Paige smiled, shyly. "I have a few others in my collection that aren't for sale. I call it...my blue period," she giggled at her own joke, unable to stop herself. Madison groaned.

"Oh my god, you didn't just say that! Your blue period?"

Paige nodded. "I'm afraid I did," she said. "It was bad. I know."

Madison shook her head, amazed at the laughing, warm, gorgeous creature standing before her.

"Well, some things you just have to keep for yourself," Madison said, more seriously. Paige took a deep breath to stop her laughter, and nodded.

"Yes, I do," she agreed.

"I'm sorry...I'll let you get back to work, " Madison said, suddenly aware that she had been taking up Paige's attention for too long.

"I really should," Paige said, reluctantly.

"Madison, can I...can I call you? Please? I want to talk to you more...but not here," she said, glancing around. She waited expectantly for an answer. Madison was taken aback, she hadn't expected to see her, let alone deal with the issue of what happened after. What now?

She looked uncertain, and Paige's face fell. "I...I don't know. I don't want to intrude on your life here, Paige...it sounds like you're doing so well," she said, a pained look on her face. Paige

moved in closer and leaned down, close to her ear, placing her hand on her arm.

"I miss you, Madison." It was a whispered plea, her voice thick with emotion.

Madison felt her insides churn and her stomach clench, and swallowed hard.

She nodded slowly, as Paige pulled back again, her large blue eyes pleading.

"Yes...of course you can call me," Madison said, realizing she would do almost anything those eyes begged of her. She quickly pulled out her business card and gave it to Paige. It had her cell phone and work number printed on it, along with her email and private practice address.

"Thank you," Paige grinned, tucking it into her jeans pocket like she had hit gold.

"Are you ready to go yet? After reading all this stuff I really need to find that toy store," Julia said, walking up to Madison.

Paige laughed. "It's um, 2 blocks up that way and a block to your left," Paige said, pointing. Madison's head whipped around as she gazed up at Paige. Paige kept the look of innocence firmly in place. "When you work around here you get to know all the favorite hot spots," she said, primly.

Madison just shook her head and smiled fondly. "Alright Julia...we can go." She turned to Paige, not knowing how to say goodbye.

"Bye Julia, it was nice meeting you," Paige said, smiling at her.

"You too." Julia said, smiling.

Paige looked at Madison. "I'll call you. I'm so glad you found me," she said, softly.

Madison hugged her again. "Always," she whispered in her ear.

They broke apart and with a last lingering look, Madison and Julia left the store.

Paige turned around, beaming, and faced Rob who was standing at the cash register with an open mouth.

"After all that, she didn't even buy it?" he asked, looking crushed. Paige shook her head, smiling to herself.

It was ridiculous, Madison told herself, that she should be so anxious for a phone call. Yesterday

she had been so sure that Paige was gone from her life forever, and now she couldn't wait to hear from her. She checked her cell phone again. No missed calls. She flipped open the phone, making sure she had a signal. She did. She chided herself on her impatience. After all, it had only been one day, and it was only seven a.m.

Madison lay back in bed, closing her eyes and remembering seeing Paige the day before. Her eyes couldn't get enough of her, it was like a physical relief, just to see her and know she was ok. She was more than ok...she was doing wonderfully. Madison grinned as she recalled the drawing in the store window. She almost regretted not buying it now.

She finally rolled out of bed and padded down the hall to the kitchen to make coffee. As she sat drinking her coffee and reading the Seattle Post Intelligencer, her cell phone beeped with a new text message. She flipped it open to read it.

What are you doing?

It read, with an unfamiliar local number. Her heart skipped a beat and she felt a lurch of excitement.

-Who is this?

She texted back, fairly certain of who it was but wanting to make sure.

-The pain in the ass

Came the reply a few moments later. Madison grinned.

-Drinking coffee. What are you doing?

-Getting ready for work

-Sorry to hear that

-Me too. Can I call?

Madison quickly texted back.

-Yes. Call.

A minute later, the phone rang.

"Hi," Madison said.

"Hi," Paige said. "So you get to laze around today huh? I have to work all day, it's the only way Rob lets me keep such short hours during the week," she said.

"Yep, I take the weekends off. It's nice being your own boss," Madison said.

Paige laughed softly. It was so nice hearing her voice again.

"Do you work tomorrow too?" Madison asked.

"No, just all day today. I have tomorrow off to catch up on homework."

"Hmmm, that's too bad. I was hoping to talk you into going to the beach," Madison said, surprised to hear the words coming out of her mouth.

"I could always take a study break," Paige said quickly, and Madison laughed.

"I wouldn't want to be accused of being a bad influence," she chided.

"You? A bad influence?" Paige scoffed. "I think its clear who the bad influence is here," she snickered. Madison chuckled.

"Ok. Do you want me to pick you up at Leah's?"

"Yeah...I don't have a car right now, so that would be good. Do you remember how to get here?" Paige asked, feeling embarrassed suddenly at the recollection of when Madison had last been there.

"Oh yes." Madison said, recalling that night herself. "Is eleven too early?" she asked Paige.

"Eleven is good," Paige said.

"Ok...I'll see you tomorrow. Have fun at work," Madison said, teasingly.

"Thanks!" Paige said, sarcastically. "Ok. See you tomorrow." She hung up and left Madison holding the phone, a blank look on her face.

Did I just ask her out? She wondered, not even sure where the whole beach thing had come from.

We're just going to the beach. As friends. To catch up. Talk. Nothing wrong with that, she argued with herself.

She wished fervently for tomorrow to hurry up.

It was an unusually sunny and warm June day in Seattle, and Madison had on a pair of khaki shorts and a short sleeved pale yellow v-neck t-shirt. She pulled up to the apartments and walked up the stairs. She remembered with a sick feeling how scared she was the last time she had been

here, and how shocked she had been when she saw Leah answer the door. Pushing all thoughts of the past aside, Madison knocked on the door.

Tommy answered the door.

"Hi...is Paige here?" she asked, feeling like she was 15 all over again.

"Paige! Someone's here for you!" he bellowed up the stairs. He turned back around.

"You can come in if you want," he offered. Madison stepped inside the door. After a few awkward moments with Tommy standing there, looking her over, Paige came clattering down the stairs in a hurry.

"Hi! Sorry," she panted. "I couldn't decide if it was warm enough for shorts. So I brought a sweatshirt just in case," she grinned.

"Hi there." Madison said. "It can get cool by the water," she added, smiling at the flustered girl. She was wearing short denim cut off shorts, a sky blue tank top, and green flip-flops, and looked amazingly beautiful. Madison felt a flood of warmth in her chest as she looked at her.

"Ready to go?" she asked, and Paige nodded.

"Bye Tommy, tell Leah I'll be back later," she said, and they descended the stairs down to Madison's car.

"Where are we going?" Paige asked as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"Alki beach. It's one of my favorite places."

"I've never been there," Paige said.

"You'll love it," Madison assured her. Paige began to fiddle with the radio and Madison grinned. She was so happy just to be near her again.

"Do you mind?" Paige asked, settling on a classic rock station.

"Not at all. You can put anything you want on," Madison smiled.

Paige smiled back and sat back, rolled down the window and stuck her hand outside, letting the wind catch it and buffet it around. Everything about her seemed calm and relaxed, like they had done this a thousand times before. Madison wished her own nerves would settle down.

Finally, they arrived and got out of the car. The Puget Sound was blue and sparkling, white sailboats dotting the water, there were people milling around, riding bikes, rollerblading and lounging in the sun.

"The statue of Liberty?" Paige cried out, pointing. Madison laughed.

"Yeah...I was never sure why they have one here but there you have it," Madison said.

"I've been to the top of the real one," Paige said, as they walked down to the water.

"Really? I've never been," Madison said.

"Yeah my dad took me on a business trip when I was fourteen. He stayed down below while I climbed to the top. It was pretty cool being up there in the crown and looking out over Manhattan," Paige said.

They walked in silence for a while, Madison stealing sidelong glances over at Paige as the breeze whipped her long dark hair back. She looked up and caught Madison's eye, and smiled, so warmly that Madison felt it down to her toes. They walked down to the sandy beach and sat down, and Paige spread her sweatshirt out and offered part of it for Madison to sit on. Madison clumsily accepted and then realized how close that would mean she would be sitting next to Paige. Still, she didn't want to be rude, so she sat down and Paige flopped down next to her, brushing the sand off her hands.

"I really liked Julia," Paige said. "She's a real hoot!"

"Oh yeah, a real hoot," Madison rolled her eyes. Julia had gotten an earful from Madison after they left the bookstore the day she saw Paige.

"Did you two find what you were looking for?" Paige asked, trying to keep a straight face.

Madison smirked. "Julia did. Though god knows I did not need to know that much about her sex life with Todd," she shuddered. Paige laughed. Madison became aware of Paige's soft skin brushing against her as their bare arms touched, they were sitting so closely. She resisted pulling her arm away, forcing herself to relax and enjoy the closeness.

"How's school?" Madison asked.

"Great, I love it. Of course, the more I learn the more mortified I am at my old drawings. And selling them!" Paige groaned.

Madison shook her head. "I like your old drawings."

"I like some of them, too," Paige admitted.

"Guess who I ran into?" She asked, suddenly.

"Who?" Madison asked.

"Kris! She was eating lunch next door to the bookstore and I went in for coffee. She's doing

really well," Paige added. Madison raised her eyebrows.

"Is she...gay too?" Madison asked. She was always the last to know.

"I guess so. I never knew it in the program. But then it never really came up," Paige laughed. "She asked me out! I was so embarrassed."

Madison felt a little pang of jealousy. "What did you say?" she asked, trying to sound like the mildly interested friend she was supposed to be.

"NO. I have no interest in...her. That way. Uh uh," Paige said, shaking her head. "It was weird."

Madison laughed, feeling relieved, even though she knew it shouldn't matter to her. She felt her inner therapist come out and take over the conversation.

"Have you dated at all since you were discharged?" she asked Paige.

"No," Paige said.

"Why not?" Madison asked, knowing she was pushing.

"I don't know. I've had some offers, working in a queer bookstore lends itself to that sort of thing but, I just haven't. Not interested. How about you...dating anyone lately?"

Madison glanced at her, hesitating.

"Julia is always trying to set me up. I've had enough blind dates that were arranged by her or Todd to know better than to trust her *ever* again," She smiled.

"Does she set you up with men?" Paige finally asked. Madison felt her cheeks flush, and she picked up a stick and started tracing patterns in the sand with it.

"Well...she used to, but...not anymore."

"Does she...set you up with women?" Paige asked, digging her bare toes into the warm sand, having kicked off her flip-flops earlier.

"She's tried to set me up with a few women from her work but, I've declined. Somehow, I doubt her taste in women will be any better than her taste in men. Other than Todd who is a sweetheart," Madison admitted. She felt uncomfortable with the conversation, and wished she could steer it elsewhere but was unsure how.

Paige looked at Madison, her brow furrowed, as if she wanted to say something. Finally, she grabbed her hand and tugged.

"Come build a sand castle with me," she urged, and Madison found herself pulled to her feet.

"Aren't you the strong little thing!" Madison complained as she followed obediently into the wetter sand.

"Must be the Tae Kwan Do lessons," Paige said, turning her head and grinning.

"You're full of surprises," Madison muttered.

"Don't worry, I promise I won't kick your ass," Paige teased.

Then it dawned on her. Paige was learning self-defense. This thought made Madison very happy. She watched the girl walk in front of her. She looked so self-assured, and now that she looked closer, she saw more muscle definition in her upper arms and legs. Her very, very long legs. She hurried to catch up to her.

"I think it's fantastic!" Madison said.

Paige looked embarrassed.

"It's pretty fun," she admitted. "I did freak out a little when we first had to demonstrate a defensive kick against another student. But I asked the instructor if it could be another woman and she said yes," Paige said. Madison nodded, knowingly.

"Eventually I will kick some guy's ass," Paige grinned.

"I bet you will," Madison said, without thinking. "I'd love to be there when you do."

"Thanks," was all Paige said. She dropped down to her knees in the sand and scooped up some damp sand with her fingers.

"This feels about right," she said. She began scooping large amounts of sand up in piles with her hands, patting and forming it.

"Come on...a little water and sand won't kill you," she said, looking up at Madison encouragingly. Madison shrugged and dropped down beside her.

"I haven't done this since I was a kid."

"How old are you anyway?" Paige asked suddenly, as if it had just dawned on her. Madison laughed.

"Too old."

Paige rolled her eyes.

"Oh come on. It's not fair, you know how old I am."

"Yes, you're over a decade younger than me," Madison said.

"You're thirty two?" Paige asked, and Madison shook her head.

"Thirty three." She corrected. "I've got twelve years on you, kiddo."

"Oh. See now, that's not too old," Paige grinned impishly. "And you only have eleven years on me, doc. I turned twenty-two last month."

"Oh. Well. Excuuuuse me" Madison said. "Eleven years then." She said, as she dug her own hands into the dirt.

"Happy birthday by the way," she said. "I'm sorry I wasn't around to get you anything."

Paige smiled. "I'm just glad you're here now."

"Is this really going to look anything like a castle?" she demanded, seeing only huge piles of sand.

"Yep. Just keep digging. I'll make the moat," Paige said, determinedly. She dug a large trough around the piles of dirt and then started to use her hands to form the walls and spires of the castle. Madison worked on collecting more wet sand for her, and watched her use her hands to mold the sand into something resembling a castle. She was fascinated by Paige's long, delicate fingers and the way she used them to form the shapeless blobs of sand into art.

"There," Paige said, with great satisfaction as she sat back on her heels to observe her handiwork.

"What do you think?" she asked Madison, who was thinking at that moment that Paige was more beautiful every time she saw her.

"Beautiful," Madison said, tearing her eyes from Paige over to the sand castle. "But...don't you think we should have built it higher up the beach?" she asked, worriedly. The waves were lapping close to them already.

"That's the irony of sand castles," Paige replied, looking out at the water. "You have to build them near the water because you need the sand wet enough to hold together. But that also means you usually have to watch it get washed away after spending all that time and effort building it."

Madison was stunned at this insight coming from Paige. It sounded similar to her experience with Paige. She spent all that time helping her, healing her, and then had to let her go. But...she hadn't let her go, not really. She was here with her, right now. She didn't want to lose her and watch her disappear like the ocean was threatening to do to their castle.

"Let's go," Madison said, standing up. "I can't bear to watch the destruction," she joked, and Paige stood up, brushing sand off her hands and legs.

"Ok...you softie. What do you want to do now?" she asked as she put her sweatshirt on, shivering slightly.

"Are you getting cold?" Madison asked, concerned. "We could go get some lunch if you're hungry. I know a great place for ribs, if you like them."

"I'm starving," she admitted.

"I promise, it's much better than hospital food," Madison said, a twinkle in her eye.

"God, I hope so!" Paige groaned at the memory.

They dug into their food as soon as it arrived, using their fingers and getting messy and sticky from the BBQ sauce. It may have seemed an ungraceful way to eat, but it was really the only way to eat ribs, Madison thought, though she was shocked as she watched Paige eat. She never knew eating ribs could be so...sensual.

Paige sucked on the tip of a rib and then set it down, popping her fingertips into her mouth and sucking them clean. Her tongue flicked out occasionally to get any stray spots of BBQ sauce on her lips. Madison almost knocked over her iced tea in her haste to take a drink, her mouth suddenly going dry. *Dear god. Leave it to me to suggest eating finger food!*

She resumed eating her lunch, picking up her fork and sampling the potato salad.

"This is really good" she told Paige as she tasted the creamy salad. Paige took a bite of her own.

"It's not bad. I make it better though," she bragged.

"You make potato salad?" Madison asked, surprised.

"Yep...my grandma taught me her secret recipe. I used to cook all the time but now...well Leah's kitchen is hardly big enough to turn around in, let alone deal with the dirty dishes always piled up from those two. Tommy is such a slob," Paige rolled her eyes.

Madison laughed. "My kitchen is HUGE. I never cook in there, it's a waste, really. You could cook up a banquet in my kitchen," she said.

"Could I?" Paige asked, her face lighting up. "I'd love to make you dinner."

"I was kidding...but, if you really want I guess you could," Madison said hastily, not having intended it as an actual invitation. Paige's face fell a bit.

"I'm sorry. I just...I didn't mean to invite myself," she stammered. Madison kicked herself, hating to be the cause of the unhappy look on her face.

"Paige," she said, waiting until Paige looked back up and met her eyes.

"I would love it if you came over and cooked for me," she said, sincerely. "Really."

"Okay," Paige said, her face lighting up again. "Just tell me when and I'll come over and knock your socks off with my culinary skills."

She resumed eating the messy ribs, and Madison kept her eyes firmly glued to her own plate of food.

"How about next Friday?" Madison suggested.

"Ok," Paige said. "I work till 4 but I can come over after. If you give me directions I can get a ride from Leah, she can pick me up from work."

"Alright. Can I call you later this week with directions?"

Paige nodded.

After eating, they strolled down the beach again, going back over to where they had built the sand castle earlier. The tide was in and the ocean covered the part of the beach where the sand castle had been. Madison felt a pang of sadness, then chastised herself for it. It was just sand. This...Paige being here, next to her...was real, and solid. And she was still here, she thought with a smile.

Paige set down her pencil and sketchbook, opening and closing her hand, stiff from holding the pencil so long. She looked down at the sketch wistfully. It seemed funny to her that she could draw such intimate portraits when she hadn't experienced anything like that in so long. Or ever...not like these drawings portrayed. She traced the curve of a woman's hip on the paper, and then stopped, not wanting to smudge it.

Feeling thirsty, she got off her bed and walked down the hall to the kitchen. She got to the fridge and was looking around inside for a bottle of water when she heard a muffled cry from Leah's bedroom. Paige's ears pricked and she listened hard, her body tense, her hand still on the door of the fridge. Then she heard Leah's voice again.

"Oh god...Tommy!"

Paige let her breath out and sighed. It was one of the downsides of sharing a small apartment

with Leah and Tommy. If she was unlucky enough to come out when they were having sex she was bound to hear them. It normally sent her running back to her room and turning her music up louder, but tonight the sounds that caught her ears suddenly struck her differently. She felt a throbbing between her legs as a picture of Madison flitted into her mind. She wondered what Madison sounded like...she quickly shoved the thought from her mind.

"Oh yeah baby...that feels so good!" Leah cried out. Paige opened her bottle of water, her cheeks getting hot and she felt like she was somehow intruding on a very private moment. Which she was. She hurried and turned to go back down the hall.

She walked past Leah's bedroom and unconsciously slowed down as the sounds intensified. She heard Leah moaning and gasping.

"Please...please...right there, yes...yes...oh god, Tommy!" Leah screamed, the sudden silence more telling than all the other noises combined.

Paige quickly closed her bedroom door behind her, feeling mortified. As she turned her radio on, she replayed the sounds from Leah's room in her mind and the image of Madison popped into her head again, unbidden. The thought of Madison making sounds like that...Madison making *her* make sounds like that...Paige felt the pounding throb between her legs intensify at the images that went through her head.

Images she had pushed down for...so long, came floating into her head effortlessly. What *would* Madison sound like? Would she moan? Whimper? Gasp? What would she look like? She saw an image of Madison's hands clutching and twisting at the bed sheets, her body arched, heard a low languid moan coming from her mouth, Paige's body on top of hers...

She climbed into bed, slipping under the covers. She felt a burning ache as she imagined Madison and her in an intimate embrace like the lovers in her sketch. Of course she knew, somewhere deep down that every time she sketched two women touching, it was always her and Madison, thinking of how she wanted to touch her...how she wanted to be touched, that inspired the ideas.

Paige felt sensations in her body she hadn't felt in so long, awakening and stirring within her. Her hand moved down between her legs, her own fingers exploring without thought, the throbbing leading them downward until her hand brushed against soft hair, her fingers pressing in a little further. She felt wetness there, slick and slippery, and gasped softly in surprise. She quickly withdrew her hand, unwilling to go any further, and rolled over in bed. A smile crossed her mouth as she embraced the unfamiliar feelings, feelings she feared she would never have again, and hope sprung up inside her. She tried to ignore the ache deep down inside as she slowly surrendered to sleep.

Having her own office with no one to disturb her was nice, Madison mused, as she kicked off her shoes, stretched out on her couch, and closed the blinds. Other than her scheduled clients, that is. But her next appointment wasn't for another hour, and she took the free block of time to lie down and close her eyes. As she dozed lightly, the vibration of her cell phone, still clipped to her waist, awakened her. She sat up and unclipped it. She had a new text, and she pushed the button to read it. It was from Paige.

What makes your mouth really water?

Madison dropped the phone onto the floor with a clatter, and sat in shock for several moments before realizing it. She picked up the phone and looked again, wondering if she had read it wrong in her sleepy state.

-What makes your mouth really water?

Her stomach did several flips. She texted back, her hand shaking and having to backspace and retype it several times.

-What???

She hit send, and sat there with the phone open, waiting breathlessly. *What was that girl trying to do, kill her???*

The phone beeped at her, and she hit the message button.

-Just wondering what you want me to cook for dinner Friday night?

Madison laughed aloud, still in shock. She quickly typed back.

-Surprise me

The phone beeped and she hit the message button.

-What did you think I was talking about???

She chuckled to herself, shaking her head. She opened her phone back up and typed another message.

-Pain in the ass

The phone beeped again a minute later.

-Thanks. I try

With a last look around the room, Madison fluffed the cushions on the couch and lit several candles on the mantle. She wasn't sure why but she really wanted Paige to like her house, and she spent the entire day Friday obsessively cleaning and straightening things that didn't need it. The doorbell rang and Madison went to answer it, opening the door. Paige was standing there, carrying several paper bags, and Madison reached out and took one from her.

"Hi there," Madison said, smiling at her.

"Hi," Paige said, following her inside. She walked behind Madison, looking around her as they passed through the front hall into the living room and into the kitchen. Madison set the bag down on the marble counter top and took the others from Paige, setting them down as well. Paige was looking around the kitchen, her eyes wide in awe. She looked adorable tonight in a black angora sweater and jeans. The sweater looked so soft Madison wanted to reach out and touch it.

"It IS huge! And it's gorgeous!" she exclaimed, gazing at the gleaming marble counter tops and huge industrial silver refrigerator.

"I told you it was huge," Madison smiled. "And it is highly underused, so I'm sure it will be glad to see you cooking. Maybe it will feel more appreciated."

"What are you making, anyway?" Madison asked, curiously rifling through the bags. Paige slapped her hands away playfully.

"No peeking. You said you wanted to be surprised, didn't you?"

Madison dropped her hands in defeat. "I suppose I did," she admitted, giving Paige a mock glare. "Then let me give you the grand tour before you get started."

As she led Paige around the house, Madison felt nervous butterflies in her stomach, watching Paige's face and reactions.

"This is the kitchen, obviously," she waved her hand around. "This is the living room and dining room," she said, as they walked back out the way they had come. Paige took in the polished oak hardwood floors, the soft looking black leather couch and matching oversized chair, with ottoman. The dining room had a small round oak table and chairs, the china cabinet behind it filled with expensive looking dinnerware. Above the table was a multicolored light fixture.

There was a large fireplace near the couch, with candles burning on the mantle above. A decorative mirror hung above the mantle, and next to the fireplace was a large black flat screen TV. A huge colorful Oriental rug covered most of the living room.

"You have a beautiful home," Paige said.

"I'm glad you like it. I haven't really appreciated it in a long time, but I remember falling in love with it when I first bought it. It was the first thing I did when I got hired at the hospital,"

Madison said.

She didn't add that she now found her home lonely and depressing, and spent as much time away from it as possible.

She led Paige onward, down a long hall. Paige lagged behind, looking at the framed photos that lined the hallway walls.

"Awww, Is this you?" she squealed in delight, pointing to a blonde haired toddler in a pink dress on a rocking horse.

Madison looked back and groaned.

"Yes, it is...I hated that dress, too. It was itchy." She urged Paige on, hoping to distract her from all the photos. "In here is the guest bedroom," she said, opening a door and switching on the light. It was large for a guest bedroom, with the same hardwood floors and an old-fashioned braided rug and a twin bed with a patchwork quilt on it. The room had large bay windows and the walls were pale yellow.

Paige looked in, an admiring expression on her face.

"The bathroom is in here," Madison said, pointing to an open door, and then she opened another door at the end of the hall.

"Master bedroom, mine, naturally...and master bathroom at the other end of the room," she said, not walking in but switching on the light.

Paige peeked inside and saw an even larger bedroom with mostly blues and greens, a big blue fuzzy rug covering the floor beside the Queen sized bed. The comforter had blue and white flowers on it and the bed had a number of pillows of all sizes and colors. A small bookcase was next to the bed. It was crisp and clean, uncluttered...it was Madison, and Paige smiled.

"It's gorgeous," she said.

"I hardly ever go in there," Madison said.

"Why not?" Paige asked, unable to fathom a reason.

"I just...don't like it. I sleep on the couch most nights," Madison said, feeling a little foolish and ungrateful, suddenly wishing she hadn't shared quite that much information about herself. Paige glanced at her as if she were trying to figure something out.

Madison closed the door, and turned and walked down the hall.

"So that's it...the grand tour! What do you think?"

"It's amazing. I love it!" Paige said, earnestly. "It feels...peaceful and mellow. Safe," Paige said, suddenly turning around feeling mortified. She just described how Madison made *her* feel. Of course her house made her feel that way!

If Madison noticed anything, she didn't say. "Thank you, I am lucky I bought it when the market was so low, it's nearly impossible to buy a home this big for a decent price in this area anymore," she said. "Now...where is this culinary artist I have been promised? Is she around here somewhere?" she said, looking around the room. Paige laughed.

"I really should start cooking or we'll be eating at midnight."

"Go ahead...I'm not stopping you," Madison said, smiling as Paige hurried from the living room into the kitchen.

After a few minutes Madison poked her head in. "Am I allowed to come in?" she asked.

Paige looked up from the stove, which was on the central island in the middle of the kitchen.

"Yes. Especially since I have no idea how to turn this thing on," she laughed. Madison showed her how to work the knobs and went to get two wineglasses from the cupboard.

"Would you like something to drink? Water? Wine?" she asked, opening a bottle of Shiraz for herself.

Paige glanced over. "That looks good," she said, as she set a large skillet on high heat.

She watched Madison out of the corner of her eyes, as she poured the wine. Paige blushed as she recalled her recent blossoming feelings and the images she had been having of Madison, and felt slightly guilty. She looked so beautiful tonight, her hair slightly wavy and tousled, her eyes smoky and sultry looking with eye make-up she had never seen her wear before. She looked casual and yet as neat as always, her white tailored button down shirt clinging to the contours of her body, several buttons at the top undone showing a soft grey camisole underneath, and comfy looking light jeans. She wore soft looking light brown suede boots, which for some reason Paige found incredibly sexy.

Madison finished pouring the wine and brought them over to Paige, handing her a glass, as she pulled a barstool over to the opposite side of the Island, and sipped her wine, watching Paige.

"Are you going to tell me what we're having, since you're letting me watch?" Madison asked.

"Who said I was going to let you watch?" Paige smirked. She rifled through a bag and pulled out some fresh herbs and a bag of mushrooms.

"Since you're here you might as well be useful," she said, finding a sharp knife and cutting board and handing them to Madison.

Madison looked at her with a surprised expression.

"Julia never makes me help," she objected.

"Julia isn't cooking, is she?" Paige retorted, the haughty look on her face causing Madison to smile.

"True. Ok, but don't blame me if I ruin it," she said, chopping the herbs tentatively.

"Don't worry, it doesn't matter what they look like, it will all taste good," Paige said, hiding a smile at the doctor who normally seemed so sure of herself, struggle to chop rosemary. Paige took a sip of the wine, and closed her eyes, letting the flavor roll around on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. When she looked up she saw Madison's eyes on her, and smiled sheepishly.

"This is really good," Paige said.

"I'm glad you like it. It's a vintage Shiraz I've been saving to share with someone...I thought tonight was as good a reason as any to break it open."

Paige smiled shyly. She put a saucepan on the stove and tossed in a lump of butter, melting it. She added a cup of Arborio rice and cooked it until it was lightly toasted, and then added chicken stock.

"I'll need those mushrooms soon, better get chopping," she said warningly to Madison. Madison finished the herbs and slid them onto a plate.

"Awfully demanding," she muttered, but smiled when Paige looked over at her.

"So where did you learn to cook?" Madison asked as she chopped the wild mushrooms into tiny pieces.

"Uh uh," Paige said, startling Madison who looked up.

"Uh uh?" she asked, confused.

"Uh uh. You already know...*way* too much about me," Paige said, daring Madison to deny it with a raised eyebrow.

"I want to know more about you. So you answer my questions and then I'll answer yours," she said, looking pleased with herself.

"Ok, that does seem only fair, what do you want to know?" Madison asked, looking leery of the conversation.

Paige seemed to ponder for a moment, stirring her rice.

"Have you ever been married?" she asked.

"No, never," Madison said with a shake of her head.

"What kind of music do you like?" she asked, her mind suddenly full of things she wanted to know about her.

"Lots of kinds...jazz, blues...I love Ella Fitzgerald and Etta James, Ray Charles. I like lots of oldies...I'll listen to almost anything...I like some country, mostly the older stuff like Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash," she said. "My favorite band growing up was Duran Duran," she admitted sheepishly.

"Hey, they're still cool," Paige said, consolingly. "I like going and hearing the new local bands around here," Paige said. "I love Brandi Carlile, and I like a lot of classics too," she said.

"Anything else you want to know about me?" Madison asked, as amused expression on her face.

What do you sound like when you're in the throes of ecstasy? The thought popped into her head and Paige felt the blood rush to her face. Horrified, she turned around and walked over to the fridge, getting out some cream.

"Um, yeah...did you grow up around here?" she asked, her back still turned.

"No, I grew up all over the place, I was an army brat," Madison said. Paige walked back to the stove, stirring in some cream.

"That must have sucked," she said, and Madison smiled.

"Yeah, it kind of did," she admitted. "But there were perks. If I hated my teacher or got on the wrong side of someone I usually moved away before long, and I got to start over fresh."

Paige nodded thoughtfully. "How did you wind up here in Seattle?"

"Well, I got a scholarship to Reed College in Portland, and after I got my PhD I was offered a job in Seattle. I met Julia at Reed and we've been best friends ever since. She followed me to Seattle and got a job here too, so we've been able to stay close, which is nice." Madison explained. She handed Paige the chopped mushrooms.

"Thank you," Paige said, with a bright smile. Madison watched Paige cook, and sipped her wine, the conversation ebbing and flowing naturally, as Paige took out some chicken breasts and coated them in seasonings and the fresh herbs Madison had chopped for her. She seared them in

the skillet and then moved them to the oven. Madison seemed perfectly content to watch her as she stirred, tasted, and cooked away.

"Ok, almost done," Paige said, looking slightly frazzled and wiping her hands on a dishcloth. She asked for a salad bowl and Madison managed to find a suitable one, and Paige tossed some salad greens with the leftover herbs and some olive oil and red wine vinegar.

"Ready to eat?" she asked, at last, serving the food onto two white plates Madison had provided.

"I can hardly wait," Madison said, the aroma from the oven driving her crazy.

They took their plates and wine and carried them into the dining room, sitting opposite each other, Madison cutting her chicken breast and placing a forkful into her mouth.

After chewing and swallowing she moaned loudly.

"God that's good!" she exclaimed, and Paige's eyes grew huge as she managed not to spit her wine out.

She smiled broadly at Madison's noises of approval.

"What is this?" Madison asked, tasting the rice dish. "It's so good!"

"Wild mushroom risotto...Rosemary chicken, and fresh herb salad," Paige said.

"This is...incredible," Madison said, looking at Paige in amazement. "What *aren't* you good at?" she asked, and Paige laughed, shaking her head and biting back a reply.

"You like it then, I take it?" she asked, looking flustered but pleased.

"I love it, Paige," Madison said, smiling softly at the girl across the table. She watched as Paige squirmed uncomfortably at the compliment and took another sip of wine.

Madison felt a glow settle over her entire being, as she ate and laughed with Paige. She couldn't remember ever having such an enjoyable meal in her own home. Even the kitchen felt like an entirely different place, with Paige there.

It was as if the whole house opened up and embraced her, recognizing her as a kindred spirit and sending a warm, happy vibe throughout the house and the inhabitants. Everything seemed brighter, more colorful, the light above them, the rug on the floor, the food on her plate. Everything tasted better, smelled better. Even the sound of their voices happily talking and joking, the laughter echoing off the walls, was strange and new. And good. It felt...so good. So right.

It caused an ache inside her too, one that Madison had felt growing ever since the meal was almost over. She didn't want the night to end...she didn't want Paige to leave.

They cleared their plates and Madison helped Paige clean up in the kitchen. Paige watched as she stood at the sink, washing dishes. She pondered what would happen if she walked up behind her and wrapped her arms around her waist, buried her face in her hair, and kissed her neck. She groaned inwardly at the image and fought to think of something else, anything else.

"Do you work tomorrow?" Madison asked, as she rinsed the saucepan out and set it in the wooden dish rack to dry.

"Yeah, Saturday is my long day," Paige replied, not sounding thrilled.

"Do you need a ride home? I can take you," Madison asked, hating to bring it up, but she felt she ought to.

"No that's ok...Leah let me drive her car," Paige said, "But thanks."

"You really do have a beautiful home," Paige said, leaning against the sink next to Madison. "It was fun cooking in here," she added, "I felt like I was running my own restaurant."

Madison smiled. "You'd be a great chef," she said.

"I bet your parents are really proud of you," Paige said, thinking of the house, and her job, her entire life.

Madison's face fell, and Paige watched her in alarm.

"I...I doubt that," Madison said, stiffly. "My father lives in Colorado, he's never been here," she said.

"What about your mother?" Paige asked.

"My mom died when I was young," Madison said, scrubbing a plate a little too vigorously. Paige looked at her in shock.

"I'm so sorry Madison," she said softly. Madison shook her head, shrugging it off.

"It was a long time ago. But thanks," she added, softening the rebuff. Paige saw the pain there, in those soft green eyes that she knew so well.

Paige reached over and took the plate from Madison's hands. She set it down in the sink and

turned Madison, pulling on her arm gently to make her face her.

She reached out and cupped Madison's cheek with her hand, stroking her skin softly with her thumb. "Madison," she whispered, raw emotion swimming in her eyes.

Paige felt an incredible pull, everything in her urging her to lean down and kiss those soft looking, full lips. But even as Paige dipped her head slightly, moving toward her, she saw a look of sheer panic on Madison's face, and felt her pull away slightly from her hand.

She turned around, facing away from her.

"I'm sorry, I don't talk about my family a lot," Madison said, her back still turned. "I really don't have contact with any of them," she said. She turned back around, avoiding Paige's eyes.

"I understand," Paige said softly, meaning about her family as well as her pulling away, and Madison knew of course, that she did.

"I had a really great time, thanks," Paige said as turned and gathered up her things. "I should probably get going...gotta get up early in the morning, unlike some people I know."

"Hey, I pulled many weekend and late night shifts before I got to set my own rules," Madison defended herself.

"How are you sleeping?" Madison asked, hesitantly.

Paige looked up, taken off guard by the question.

"Pretty good," she said. "For the most part," she added.

"Drive safely. Text me when you get home so I know you're safe," Madison added.

Paige smiled. "Still staying up at night worrying about me, Doc?" she asked, a little wistfully.

"Always," Madison said, and pulled her in for a hug. Paige basked in the embrace, breathing her in and feeling the warm soft skin of her face against her neck. She held her for as long as she thought she could get away with and finally pulled away, reluctantly.

"Goodnight. Thanks again for a wonderful dinner," Madison said, smiling at her.

"You're welcome. Goodnight," Paige said, ducking her head shyly at the compliment and then looked back at her, smiling. She walked down the pathway that was lit up with lawn decorations, and noticed that Madison watched until she got into her car, and locked her door as soon as she got in.

Good girl, Madison thought, a painful clench in her stomach as she thought briefly of anything bad happening to her, ever again.

A half an hour later Madison got a text.

Made it home in one piece. Goodnight

Madison texted back:

Good. Sweet dreams

She hoped desperately that Paige would have sweet dreams. Madison went to curl up on the couch with a blanket, the house suddenly feeling very cold, and very empty.

Sunday morning found Madison over at Julia's house having coffee and bagels.

"So she cooked you dinner?" Julia asked, as they walked outside to the deck with their coffee.

"Yeah, it was really nice," Madison said casually, keeping the smile off her face. She didn't need to give Julia any more ammunition than she already had.

"That is so cute!" Julia grinned. "Was it good?" she asked, waggling her eyebrows, but Madison missed it as she sipped her coffee.

"Oh my god, yes...it was incredible," Madison said, recalling the food.

"Mmhm," Julia said suspiciously, giving Madison a knowing look.

"Shut up," Madison said, rolling her eyes. "It was just dinner between two friends! Nothing more." Julia snorted but remained silent.

"So when are we having our next girl's night out?" Madison asked, to change the subject.

"I'm thinking next Saturday," Julia said. "Todd is going out of town anyway on business so I want you to keep me company." She said with a pleading look.

Madison laughed. "Ok...where do you want to go?"

Julia gasped. "Ohhh *I* know! You should invite Paige out with us!" she exclaimed, her face lit up with excitement.

Madison shook her head. "No way, Julia, I am not subjecting her to...you, especially you, drunk," she said firmly.

Julia looked hurt. "I can behave," she pouted. "Besides, you two are just friends right? So it shouldn't really matter how badly I embarrass myself." She smiled, looking smug.

"I wasn't worried about you embarrassing yourself," Madison said. "I'm worried about you embarrassing *me*."

"Oh come on, it'll be fun. She probably doesn't have that many friends to hang out with, right? She is stuck in her friend's apartment all the time. She'd probably have fun," Julia wheedled.

Madison sighed. "Alright, I will ask her, but don't get your hopes up. You probably scared her off that first day, bringing up toy stores and lesbian porn," Madison said, scowling.

"No honey, I think the only one it scared was you. But you're so adorable when you blush," Julia said, and leaned over to kiss Madison on the cheek.

"Blech!" Madison said, jokingly, and rubbed the kiss off her face in disgust.

"Women." She muttered.

How the hell did I let her talk me into this, Madison groaned inwardly. She sat at a table in the middle of a lesbian bar, the music so loud she could hardly hear herself talk, let alone the others. Paige and Julia were giggling and talking, huddled up close to one another, while Madison hid behind a bottle of beer.

She let her gaze wander around the bar, having never experienced anything like this before. There were so many women, some of them very butch looking with short or even shaved heads, some very feminine and everything in between, clustered around the bar, at tables and on the dance floor. The music was pulsing and deep and reverberated through her entire body. She watched as two young rather androgynous looking women dirty danced together, doing things that made Madison feel like an old prude.

She looked away and glared over at Julia who was oblivious of her torment. Paige looked comfortable here and so did Julia for that matter, Madison thought, resentfully.

Paige leaned over the table and said something to Madison. She couldn't hear her and shrugged helplessly. Paige leaned over even further and cupped her hand around Madison's ear.

"Come dance with us!" she said loudly. Madison shook her head.

"No thanks!" she shouted back. "I don't dance!"

Paige gave her a pouty look but then turned to Julia who jumped up immediately and pranced off to the dance floor with Paige. Madison rested her head in her hands, wishing for once that she could be a little more carefree like Julia.

The bartender walked over with a beer and set it down on the table in front of Madison.

"I didn't order this," Madison said, slightly confused. The woman smiled.

"I know. That woman over there asked me bring it to you," she said, gesturing over to the bar. Madison turned slightly to look, and saw a very butch woman standing there, smiling at her with a slight bow of the head. She was very cute, with dark spiky hair and wore a white t-shirt, jeans, and black army boots.

Madison was flustered and didn't know what to do, so she just said thanks to the bartender and nodded her head politely to the butch. She turned back and took a sip of the beer.

"Excuse me," a voice said right above her, and she looked up quickly. It was the butch from the bar.

"Hello," Madison said, unsure of what else to say.

"Do you mind if I sit?" the butch asked, and Madison shook her head, not wanting to be rude.

"Are you alright?" the butch asked, pulling a chair closer so they could hear each other. "You looked upset," she added, looking concerned.

"I'm Kendall," she said, holding out her hand. Madison took it in hers and shook it hesitantly.

"Madison," she said, mustering up a smile. "I'm fine, thanks for asking...just...a bit of a headache," she said, lamely. She glanced out at the dance floor and saw Julia and Paige dancing side by side, bumping hips and laughing, looking silly.

"I just hated to see such a beautiful face hidden away," Kendall said, sincerely, and Madison felt her face flush. She didn't know how to respond, so picked up her beer, drinking from it deeply.

"I'm fine, really," she insisted, trying to think of an excuse to get up. She couldn't think of one so she stayed put and tried to make small talk with Kendall.

Out on the dance floor, Paige was having a blast with Julia who was like the sister she never had. She hadn't really had many chances to go to gay bars, since she had just turned 22 and the past year she wasn't exactly going out partying.

She glanced over at the table, wishing Madison was out here with her. She saw Madison sitting and talking to another woman, a very handsome, Butch woman. She saw Madison shaking her head and lowering her eyes bashfully, and felt a rush of jealousy and possessiveness wash over her. That butch was flirting with her! Julia saw Paige's movements come to a stop and followed her gaze out to the table. She looked at Paige's expression and grinned.

"Looks like Maddie has an admirer!" she yelled. Paige nodded, not breaking her gaze. Paige resumed dancing, very distractedly, looking over at Madison every few seconds. She saw Madison laughing at something the butch was saying, and then the butch put her hand on Madison's arm. Paige was off the dance floor in a heartbeat, leaving Julia spinning around all by herself.

Madison looked up as she saw Paige approach the table. She flopped down in the chair beside her, breathing hard.

"Hi," Madison said, smiling at her.

"You should have come out there with us," Paige said, casually draping her arm across the back of Madison's chair. She shot the butch a glare that would have made almost anyone tuck their tail between their legs and scamper off. Madison was oblivious to this as she glanced over at Kendall. The butch stood up and smiled wistfully down at Madison.

"Thanks for the chat," she said, nodding her head politely at Madison.

"Thank you for the drink," Madison said, smiling.

"Anytime," Kendall said, and reluctantly walked away.

Madison turned back to Paige. "Did you two have fun out there?" she asked.

Paige looked happy now. "Yes," she said. "Julia is a lot of fun."

"So you're in a lesbian bar for an hour and you already have butches hitting on you?" Paige asked, one eyebrow raised.

"She just felt sorry for me," Madison said, tossing her head.

"She was coming onto you," Paige insisted, looking slightly put out. Madison thought it was rather cute.

"I don't think so," Madison objected.

"She bought you a drink...people don't do that out of pity, Madison," Paige said, shaking her head.

Madison thought about it and shrugged. "I didn't know what to say," she admitted. "I've never done this before," she added, gesturing with her head at the bar.

"What would you think if a guy at a bar came up to you, bought you a drink and put his hand on your arm?" Paige asked her, pointedly.

Madison laughed. "That he was hitting on me," she said, feeling the blush creep back onto her cheeks.

Paige just looked at her and nodded slowly.

"Women aren't any different," she said. "Well, besides the obvious," Paige grinned, and Madison laughed.

Julia came up to the table huffing and puffing, and red-faced.

"Where did you run off to?" she asked Paige, looking forlorn. "You ditched me!"

"Sorry," Paige said, smiling. "I was getting hot."

Julia collapsed into a chair and drank some ice water that was on the table.

After resting for a while, Julia looked around the bar restlessly. She saw a dartboard and grinned.

"Let's play darts," she said, and insistently dragged Madison and Paige over to the dartboard. Paige rounded up the various colored darts and brought them over.

"I have never played darts before in my life," Madison warned them.

Paige grinned. "Oh good, then I might have a chance to beat you," she said.

"I'm going to beat both of you." Julia bragged, a bit tipsy.

"You wanna bet?" Paige challenged her, smirking.

"Yeah, I do," Julia said confidently. "If I win you both have to buy my drinks the next time we go out."

"If I win you have to come hear my favorite band play next week," Paige said, quickly.

"What about you Maddie? What do you want if you win?" Julia asked.

Madison shrugged. "If I win...you have to come over and make me dinner again," she said, looking at Paige. Paige smiled.

"Deal," she said.

"Hey what about me?" Julia asked, petulantly.

"You can come too," Madison assured her. Julia smiled, appeased.

They ended up laughing more than throwing the darts and with more darts on the floor than on the dartboard, but at the end of three games, Madison had won, beating them both soundly. She was surprised and not a little pleased with herself, partly because she liked to think she had good aim and partly because it meant she had won their bet. She couldn't deny that she wanted Paige back over at her house again, it had been so nice the week before.

They returned to the table, as Julia got more and more drunk, keeping both Paige and Madison entertained. Madison felt herself relax and realized she was having fun, more fun than she would have imagined at the beginning of the night. Julia and Paige danced a few more times, and Madison enjoyed watching them. Especially Paige. They stayed till closing and finally left the bar, both Madison and Paige supporting a stumbling Julia back to the car. Madison drove, having only had the two beers much earlier that night, and dropped Paige off first.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Nite...thanks for inviting me," Paige said, giving Madison a quick hug.

"Bye Paige! I had a lot of fun dancing with you, you're realllly pretty," Julia mumbled, half passed out in the backseat. Paige laughed.

"Bye Julia. Good luck getting her home," Paige said to Madison, sympathetically.

"Thanks. Don't forget you owe us dinner soon," Madison reminded her.

Paige smiled to herself thinking about how she had thrown the dart game just for that reason.

"I won't," she promised. "Bye," she said softly, and closed the car door. Madison waited till she saw Paige climb the stairs to Leah's apartment and let herself in, and then drove away.

Wednesday night the phone rang and woke Madison up with a start. It was her cell phone, which she had charging right beside the couch next to her. It was 2:30 a.m. She looked to see who was calling at this god-awful hour. It was Paige. Her heart leapt in her chest and she flipped it open.

"Paige?" she asked, fearfully.

"Hi," the soft voice said. "Sorry I woke you," she said.

Madison sat up groggily.

"That's ok, is something wrong?" she asked.

"No...I just...couldn't sleep and I-" Paige paused, and Madison hung onto the silence. All kinds of thoughts went through her head.

"I'm glad you called," Madison said, earnestly.

"I just needed to hear your voice," Paige said, "It's been a while since I had a nightmare this bad. I'm sorry though...I shouldn't have called."

"Paige," Madison said, "Don't do that. We're friends, right?"

There was a long silence before Paige replied.

"Yes, we're friends."

"And that's what friends do, they call each other in the middle of the night when they need them. You know that I want to be here for you. That I *am* here for you, and I'm glad that you called me. You know, this is partly a relief! I was starting to think you were doing so spectacularly that you had swapped bodies with an alien or something," she laughed softly, trying to lighten the moment.

Paige laughed weakly.

"Nope...still me," she said, mournfully.

"I'm happy to hear it," Madison said. "Not happy about your dream but...I am glad it's still you," she said, softly. "Are you ok? Do you need me to come over?"

"No," Paige said quickly. "No, I just wanted to hear you for a minute. I'm fine," she repeated.

"Ok," Madison said. Her heart ached and all she wanted was to reach through the phone and hold her. She hated that she couldn't.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Madison asked, finally.

"No...it's nothing you haven't already heard," Paige said. "Would you...would you just talk for a while? About anything. Tell me about your day or the weather...just talk," Paige asked, and Madison smiled.

"Alright...but if I start to bore you, tell me to shut up," she warned. Paige laughed quietly again.

"Ok."

Madison started talking about what she had done that day at work, her voice calm and soothing. She rambled on about every stupid detail of her day, what she ate for breakfast, how she had to deal with the insurance person over the phone, being behind in her email correspondence, her crappy microwave dinner and what TV shows she watched that evening. Paige didn't respond to much, just listened, but Madison could feel the calm through the phone and knew it was what Paige needed. Just to hear her voice.

After ten minutes or so, Madison paused, running out of things to talk about. She heard the soft, even breathing on the other end of the line.

"Paige?" she said, softly. There was no answer. "Paige?" she said again, a bit louder. Still no answer. She smiled and realized she was asleep. Madison sighed and lay back down on the couch, cradling the phone up to her ear. She couldn't bear to hang up on her, somehow. She drifted off to sleep listening to Paige breathe, and kept the phone near her ear in case she woke up. In case she needed her.

Paige decided to cook a more casual meal this time, and settled on making fried chicken and potato salad, and a fruit salad.

"It's nice having someone else cook for a change," Julia said, glaring at Madison as the two of them sat around the kitchen while Paige fried the chicken.

Madison glared back.

"I'll cook for you Julia! Of course, you know it'll be inedible," she said.

"Yeah- no thanks," Julia said with a grin. "That smells sooo good Paige," she said, leaning forward in her stool to smell the chicken. Paige smiled. She was wearing a white chef's apron that Madison had dug up for her to keep her shirt from getting spattered with grease, and Madison thought she looked adorable in it.

As Paige went to wash the fruit for the salad, Madison went to the sink and offered to help wash and cut it. Julia watched this interaction with her mouth hanging open.

"How come you never offer to help me?" she asked, indignantly.

"Because Paige is cuter than you, Julia," Madison quipped, hiding a smirk as she washed the fruit. Paige laughed at Julia's outraged face, her own face reddening slightly.

"Alright, I guess I left myself wide open for that one," Julia said, shaking her head and grinning. "I want beer. Do you have any Maddie?"

"In the fridge, help yourself," she said.

"Paige, want one?" Julia asked, rummaging through the fridge and pulling out a bottle.

"Sure," Paige said, dropping the last of the chicken into the hot oil.

She smiled as she watched Madison cutting up the fruit into bite sized pieces.

Julia handed Paige a beer, which she accepted gratefully and sipped the ice-cold fizzy liquid.

"How come you didn't offer me one?" Madison demanded, looking up from her fruit.

"Cuz Paige is cuter than you," Julia said, beaming with self-satisfaction.

"Hah, funny" Madison said, and looked up at Paige, giving her a quick grin.

When the food was ready they all sat down around the dining room table.

"When's the last time you had me over for dinner?" Julia asked Madison, looking around the room.

Madison looked thoughtful. "I don't know...didn't I have a Christmas party here last year?" she asked.

"No. That was at my house," Julia chastised her. Madison shrugged sheepishly.

"This is really excellent," Julia told Paige, digging into her potato salad.

"It is," Madison agreed. "Potato salad is one of my favorite things in the world. If I could eat it every day I would," she laughed. "And you're right, it is better than the stuff at Alki beach."

"Thanks," Paige smiled, setting down a chicken piece and licking her fingers. Madison tried to keep her eyes focused on Julia during the meal, as she realized again with horror that they were eating finger food again, and watching Paige eat fried chicken was...distracting.

When they had all eaten their fill, Julia wanted to watch the movie she had brought with her so they moved into the living room.

"Maddie, I know you don't like Adam Sandler but you have to see this movie, you'll love it!" Julia said as she put the DVD in and turned on the TV. Madison groaned and Paige laughed.

"I love Adam Sandler," she assured Julia.

"I knew I loved her for some reason! Other than the fried chicken," Julia said, putting an arm

around Paige and giving her an impulsive squeeze.

Julia flopped down in the huge chair in front of the TV, and Madison went to sit on the couch. She looked up at Paige who was standing there shyly, looking uncertain. She patted the couch and smiled at her. Paige went and sat gingerly at the other end of the couch.

50 First dates was cuter than Madison would have guessed. She found herself really getting into it. She loved watching Paige laugh and that made it worthwhile in itself. Julia kept nodding off, complaining that Todd had worn her out the night before, getting rolled eyes and a groan from Madison.

"We don't need to hear all the sordid details of your sex life, Julia."

"You're just jealous," Julia shot back, and Madison quickly shut her mouth.

Eventually Julia fell asleep, soft snores coming from her chair occasionally. Madison got up and went to cover her with a blanket.

She brought another blanket with her from the cedar chest and covered Paige and herself with it as she sat back down.

"You cold?" She asked Paige, as she settled down again.

"A little," Paige answered, pulling the blanket up higher over her. Madison was lying at one end of the couch with her head on a cushion behind her. Her knees were bent and Paige tugged on the bottom of her jeans.

"You can stretch your legs out and put your feet on me," she said, and Madison accepted, gratefully unfolding her cramped legs and laying her bare feet on Paige's lap under the blanket.

Paige tried to concentrate on the movie but she was very distracted by the feeling of Madison's feet on her. Her fingers itched to touch her, rub her feet, but she knew she couldn't get away with it, even as a friend. She settled for gingerly resting a hand on top of her ankle under the blanket.

As the movie ended, Paige realized she was the only one awake. Madison had fallen asleep too, and Paige watched her, raptly, realizing she had never seen her asleep before.

She has seen me asleep, and in a lot of states of unconsciousness, Paige thought, thinking back to the hospital.

She had never seen Madison so unguarded, so relaxed. She looked so peaceful, her head resting on one side, her face partly hidden by blonde waves of hair across her cheek. She looked content,

and so much younger. So....vulnerable, it made Paige wish she could reach out to stroke her face, her hair. She contented herself to watching her, not caring that the movie was over.

She is so beautiful, she thought, her hand unconsciously stroked the skin on the top of her foot. Her heart felt overflowing with emotions as she watched her face, and an ache started to grow inside her as she let the feelings build. *I don't think I can be just your friend, Madison*, she thought wistfully. *I want so much more of you*. The ache grew and she felt her heart reach its breaking point.

Madison's eyes flickered open and Paige withdrew her hand, guiltily.

"God, I'm sorry," Madison mumbled, looking around dazed. "We fell asleep on you," she said, apologetically, looking over at Julia's chair.

"Well, one of you did, literally," Paige teased, hoping her face hadn't given anything away. Madison smiled up at her, stretching her legs out.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You looked so tired, and I didn't mind," Paige said.

"I guess I was tired." Madison said, looking at her watch. "It's late! Almost one. Do you want to spend the night? I think Julia is going to crash here," Madison said. Paige's eyes widened and she looked startled.

"You could have the guest bed, Julia can sleep in my room. I always sleep out here," Madison said, quickly.

"Thanks, but I took Leah's car. I've got to work tomorrow anyway," Paige said, regretfully. She didn't feel like she could stand sleeping here, in Madison's house. Not with all the feelings and emotions she was having.

"Besides, you're exhausted. You should go to bed."

Madison smiled, sleepily. "I think I was just too comfortable," she said, and slowly removed her feet from Paige's lap.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to the new film playing at the Harvard Exit Theatre this week," Madison said. "If you like foreign films."

"I do, and I love that theatre but I have a major project for school and...I really need to work on it all this week," Paige said, looking down and fidgeting with her hands.

Madison looked disappointed, but recovered quickly.

"Alright, I was just thinking...but we can do it another time, maybe," she said, awkwardly.

"Yeah, I'd like that. Some other time," Paige agreed.

"Tell Julia I said goodnight," she said, smiling over at the slumbering woman in the chair.

"I will," Madison said, slowly, peering at Paige's face. "Is something wrong?" she asked

"No, I'm just...tired, too. It's been a long day. Goodnight," she said, and abruptly turned to go to the door. Madison followed, a frown on her face.

She stopped Paige with a hand on her shoulder as she opened the door.

"Paige?" she asked, her voice questioning and concerned. Paige turned around slowly.

"Yes?" she asked, her eyes meeting Madison's. Madison gazed into them, searching for clues.

"Goodnight," Madison said, at last, and pulled Paige in to hug her. Paige hugged her back and let go quickly.

"Thanks," she said, and walked out the door. Madison stood at the door watching until she got into Leah's car, and slowly closed the door.

When Madison hadn't heard from Paige by Wednesday, she began to worry. She normally got at least a random text or phone call every day or two, and the silence was unsettling. She still felt like something hadn't been quite right on Friday night when Paige left after the movie, and she wracked her brain trying to think of why. Had she done something? Said something? She couldn't think of anything other than falling asleep on her, and she hadn't really seemed bothered by that.

She fought the urge to call her, remembering her big school project. *She's probably just swamped with work and school*, Madison assured herself.

Still, she was excited and relieved when she finally got a text from Paige the next afternoon.

-What's up, Doc?

Madison grinned.

-Not much, just leaving work. How's the project?

-Finished. Thank god. Do you want to go listen to my favorite local band with me Saturday

night?

Madison felt a flood of relief come over her. Just hearing from Paige had made her day, and now that she wanted to go out and see her again must mean that she wasn't mad at her.

-Yes. Where? What time?

-8:00 at the Three Witches on Capitol Hill

Madison didn't know the place but she could always Google it.

-Ok. Do you need a ride?

-Nope, taking Leah's car. See you there

Madison felt foolishly giddy as she replied.

-Ok. See you there.

Madison stripped off her shirt and tossed it on the bed. It landed atop a growing pile of clothes, all tried on and rejected by Madison. She cursed softly under her breath as she walked back into her walk-in closet, rifling through drawers and hangers looking for the right shirt. She had never been to this club before and she didn't know what to wear. Everything she tried on seemed wrong.

She finally settled on a soft green button up shirt and khaki cargo pants. She paid special attention to her make-up and hair, figuring all the young girls at the club probably dressed up on a Saturday night, and she damn it- she wanted to look good too.

With one last mirror check in the rearview mirror, Madison got out of the car and took a deep breath, walking into the club. It was busy but not overcrowded for a Saturday night. The place seemed nice, not too ritzy but not grungy either. There was a live band setting up in the corner of the room.

Madison glanced around, but didn't see Paige. She walked up to the bar, keeping an eye on the door, anxiously watching for her.

The bartender came over to her and she was about to ask for a beer, but the bartender plucked a bottle of beer from the fridge below the counter and opened it, sliding it in front of her.

"I...didn't order anything yet," Madison said, confused.

"I know," the young man said, grinning at her. "She did," he said, and pointed across the bar counter to the other side.

Madison turned her head and looked in the direction he was pointing.

A bar stool swiveled around and Paige was sitting there, smiling at her. Madison gasped softly, taken by surprise. She had been there the whole time. She hadn't recognized her from behind, her long dark hair swept up in a loose bun at the top of her head, with soft tendrils falling down around her face. As Paige stood up and walked over, Madison's breath seemed to be stuck in her throat, and she felt a warm burning sensation spread through her and her heart rate jump.

Paige was wearing a short, black and silver dress with a low cut neck and spaghetti straps, black stockings and high-heeled toeless black shoes. Her legs seemed to go on forever, as Madison's eyes traveled from her feet up to the hem of the short dress.

She was...stunning. Madison forced herself to breathe as Paige came closer, smiling, her eyes shining.

"Hi," she said, and bent over and kissed Madison on the cheek. A perfectly friendly sort of kiss, except for the soft nuzzle of her nose against her skin before she drew away.

She rested her hand on Madison's arm as she sat down beside her. Madison glanced down at her hand, and recalled their conversation at the bar on Girl's night out.

If someone buys you a drink and puts their hand on your arm, they are hitting on you, Paige had told her

Trying to remember how to speak, Madison breathed in Paige's perfume and felt her senses on overload. "Hi," she finally managed, her voice rough. "Thanks for the beer," she remembered.

"Do you want to go find a table?" Paige asked, looking around the room.

"Yes...do you want a drink?" Madison asked.

"Sure," Paige said, reaching for her purse.

"Let me buy you a drink," Madison said, giving her a mock glare, and Paige accepted with a smile. "What would you like?" Madison asked, as she flagged down a bartender.

"A slippery nipple," Paige said, grinning as Madison glanced up at her.

"A...what?" she asked.

Paige leaned in closer and spoke softly in her ear. "A...slippery...nipple." She repeated slowly.

Madison felt her face burst into flames.

"It's a shot. Very good. You should try it."

"And you want me to ask for this...shot?" Madison asked, mortified.

"Only if you want to buy me a drink," Paige shrugged, looking innocent.

"Pain...in...the...ass..." Madison muttered under her breath, making Paige laugh.

"Could I get a scotch on the rocks and a...slippery nipple?" Madison asked the bartender, her face getting even redder if possible.

"You're awfully cute when you blush," Paige purred near her ear.

Madison shook her head, helplessly. This was not going at all the way Madison had expected it. She had never seen Paige like this before. It wasn't just the dress, or the make-up...or the black stockings and high-heeled shoes. She held herself so confidently, she was oozing sexuality.

Madison felt panic rise up in her, all thoughts of propriety and doing the right thing fleeing from her mind. She looked over at Paige and came eye to eye with a smooth bare shoulder. She fought the urge to touch it, run her hand over it, caress it. Kiss it.

Oh god. She took a deep breath. The bartender brought the drinks over, and Madison paid him. She quickly downed her scotch, desperately needing it. She handed Paige the shot glass with a pale brown creamy liquid in it.

"Taste it," Paige insisted, holding it to Madison's lips. She tried to decline, but the edge of the glass was already at her lips. She took a small sip and tasted sweetness, but it still burned as she swallowed. Paige pulled it away and brought it to her own lips, knocking it back quickly and setting the empty glass down on the bar. She smiled at Madison and slowly licked her lips. Madison felt the panic rise again, but Paige took her by the hand and led her to a table. They sat at the small table across from each other.

"You look beautiful," Madison said, realizing she had thought it...many times already...but not said it aloud.

"Thank you. I um...I haven't worn a dress in a long time," Paige said. Madison recalled what her mother had told Paige about wearing short skirts. She had never seen Paige wear a skirt or a dress. But now she was wearing a dress. This dress. For her.

Swallowing hard, Madison smiled over at her.

"You look so different that I hardly recognized you," she said, breathlessly, still in awe of the beauty sitting across from her. She was...perfect...in every way.

Paige looked at her, smiling. "I hope that's a good thing," she said.

"Yes!" Madison assured her. "Very good. Not that you needed to look different," she said, backtracking now. Floundering. Paige put her hand over hers on top of the table.

"I understand," she said, smiling. Madison froze, the soft, warm hand on hers almost undoing her completely. Paige rubbed her thumb over Madison's skin, almost absent mindedly, as she gazed at her thoughtfully.

"You look very nice, too," she said, her eyes wandering unabashedly down to Madison's cleavage and back up to her face. "Your eyes always stand out when you wear green," she said. "They look like emeralds right now," she said, softly, looking into her eyes.

Madison squirmed, uncomfortable with the scrutiny.

"Really?" she asked. "When else have I worn green in front of you?"

Paige smiled. "The second time I saw you, actually," she said, releasing Madison's hand and sitting back in her chair. "I noticed your eyes right away, when I sat down in your office for our first session."

Mentioning the hospital jolted Madison back to reality. She tried to remind herself that she wasn't supposed to be feeling this way, looking at her this way. This was Paige...her former patient...her very young, former patient.

"You have a very good memory," Madison said. "I remember your eyes from the very first time I met you," she added. "I'd never seen that shade of blue before...it was, well, startling."

"Startling huh? I hope I didn't scare you with them too badly," Paige laughed.

"No, not scary just...different. Special."

They stopped talking for a moment and Madison sipped her beer, feeling a torrent of emotions and feelings all at once. No matter what, she couldn't help enjoy being here, with her, just even looking at her. It was blissful, after the last few days of missing her, worrying about her.

The band started warming up, and luckily they didn't sound too bad, or too loud.

"I'll be right back," Paige said, getting up. Madison couldn't tear her eyes off the dress as it clung tightly to every curve and swell of her body.

"Do you want another drink?" Paige asked.

"Just water would be nice," Madison said, as Paige walked away.

Ok...time to regroup, Madison thought. I am having a drink with her. As friends. That is all. She

struggled to push all the mixed feelings she was having down, down as far as she could. Moments later Paige was back at the table, sliding a glass of ice water towards her. She took a sip, feeling suddenly thirsty. Paige wasn't sitting and Madison looked up.

"Come with me," Paige said, holding out her hand. Madison took it, wondering what she was doing.

She led her out to the dance floor. *Oh god, no.*

"Paige, I...I don't dance, remember?" Madison protested, pulling away.

Paige just smiled at her and pulled her back. "It's a slow song. It's easy, just hold onto me and relax," she said, pulling Madison closer. Madison felt anything but relaxed, alarm bells going off in her head, and she tried to resist again.

"Please," Paige said, "It...it's a special song. I asked them to play it," she added, looking into Madison's eyes with those soft, begging blue eyes. Madison couldn't possibly turn that down, and she stopped trying to pull away. She had never danced with a woman before, not like this anyway. Paige was taller, and as she tugged Madison even closer, her face inches from her chin and her neck. She breathed her in again, feeling dizzy from the smells and sensations.

"Is this too close? Feel a little scary? Is it outside your comfort zone?" Paige teased, and Madison had to laugh.

"Touché," she managed to say. Madison tentatively put her arms around her waist as Paige's arms went around her neck. Paige was moving slowly and Madison just tried to follow her lead, feeling extremely foolish. The band started singing and Madison recognized the song immediately.

"I'll Stand by you, won't let nobody hurt you..."

Madison pulled her head back and looked up at Paige questioningly.

"I always think of you when I hear this song," Paige murmured. "I listened to it in the music room. Especially when you were gone."

Even though she knew the song, it was as if she was hearing it for the first time. Every word written for her, for the way she felt about Paige. Madison reeled at the words. It was...perfect.

"Nothing you confess, could make me love you less..."

Madison felt tears spring to her eyes as she held Paige close, letting the words soak into her.

"It's perfect," Madison whispered finally, Paige's head still resting on her shoulder. "It's everything I ever wanted to say to you."

"You did," Paige said, lifting her head up and looking down into her eyes. "You said all of that and more...sometimes with your words. Sometimes with your eyes. Sometimes with your arms, your hands. Your voice." She said, her own eyes brimming with tears.

Madison didn't know what to say, her emotions overwhelming her. She reached up and brushed a tear away from Paige's face.

"I wish I could have been there more, Paige. If I hadn't...felt certain things, for you...I could have been there, been your doctor for so much longer. I always felt like I failed you," she said.

"You never failed me, ever. Don't ever think that, Madison. You were there...every time. Every time I needed you, even when I had been horrible to you. You brought me back from the darkest places I have ever known. You saved me! You filled me up with your love and your strength, and you are the only thing that got me through night after night. It was just you...and knowing you did care about me. Yes, I wanted you as my doctor but...you always were. I just put up with Forbes because I had no other choice." She laughed. "I already knew everything I needed to know, from you. I knew I had to heal, to get better, because if I didn't I...would never have a chance to deserve you," she said, softly, looking down.

"Is that what you thought? That you didn't deserve me?" Madison asked, incredulously.

"Paige, you deserve so much more than me. You deserve to find love on your own terms, to explore the world and figure out what you want out of life. You're so young...I always knew that you were going to do great things with your life. I never wanted to get in your way, or hold you back. I tried so hard to walk away and let you start your new life fresh, with everything new and all your options wide open." Madison said, pleading with her to understand.

She wasn't sure whether her words would upset Paige, or even make her walk away. Instead, Paige leaned down and pressed her lips to hers, softly. It was nothing like the kiss in the gym, there was no anger, no rage, it was soft and warm, loving, and Madison felt her objections melting as quickly as her knees were threatening to. The feel of her soft lips moving against hers was incredible.

Paige drew back and looked into her eyes. "I have a new life, and I have all my options open. And I...still...want...you." she said, assuredly, boldly, unapologetically. Her fingers weaved through Madison's hair and she pulled her face close to hers again. She stopped, an inch from her lips. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet but urgent.

"I felt it in the gym, Madison, the way you responded to me. I have seen it in your eyes ever since that day. I've felt it in your trembling hands. I see the way you look at me now, tonight. You say you want us to just be friends but I see so much more there, in your eyes. I can't be just your friend, I'm sorry. I want so much more of you, with you. I know you want me, and I want you...I need you. If you can look me in the eyes and tell me I'm wrong, then I will walk away. Tell me you don't feel it, Madison. The pull between us, like an invisible cord. Tell me you don't miss me while we're apart. That you don't think about me at night. That you don't want to move an inch closer right now, and kiss me." Paige said, breathlessly, and she waited, her warm breath

coming in quick puffs on Madison's face.

Madison wrestled with herself, with all the voices that said it was wrong. All the reasons why not.

Her eyes locked with Paige's, and she knew it was useless, this inner battle. Useless in the face of her...and those eyes that seemed to reach down into her soul and see everything. She couldn't deny it. Any of it. She felt the last shred of resistance in her crumble.

"Oh god," Madison whispered, closing her eyes, feeling as though her heart were breaking open, the dam was opening up. All the love and desire she held back for so long came rushing to the surface.

Madison opened her eyes and looked at Paige. She moved her head closer, and it only took a slight movement, before she covered Paige's lips with her own, kissing her gently, feeling the electric charge that she had felt every time they touched course through her. She felt Paige's hands in her hair, pulling her closer still, responding hungrily as Madison continued kissing her...slow, deep, hungry kisses, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth and remembering how it had been split open and so swollen that night so long ago. She released it and kissed it again, softly.

The ache that Madison always felt when she was near Paige seemed to ease, the more she kissed her. Their kisses grew deeper and Madison felt like the cord that connected them and always strung so tightly was finally released.

They both pulled away, gasping slightly. Madison met her gaze and saw the love there, shining out, and the desire. Paige smiled at her with tears in her eyes, making her insides twist in a wonderful, painful way.

"Let's go sit down," Madison said finally, wanting to hold her all night but needing to get off the dance floor as more people started to swarm around them. She didn't trust her legs to keep her upright. She led Paige by the hand back to their table.

Madison looked across the table at Paige. She looked so happy, so beautiful. Madison's heart felt so full that it hurt.

She kept hold of her hand even as they sat down. "You are so stunningly beautiful," Madison breathed, looking at her again. She swallowed hard. "You have no idea what you do to me."

Paige bit her bottom lip nervously and glanced down shyly.

"I always felt so gangly and awkward, and you...you were always so perfect and polished and...gorgeous," Paige said.

Madison grinned. "Trust me, I am not always polished. But you are always beautiful. I've never

seen you once and thought you were gangly or awkward. You are graceful and raw and...beautiful."

"You have seen me in not so graceful moments, doc," Paige chided her.

"You were always beautiful to me," Madison replied, honestly. "Always."

Madison realized that her hand, still holding Paige's, was trembling badly. She looked down at it and grinned sheepishly.

"Are you ok?" Paige asked, squeezing her hand.

"Terrified," Madison said, her face utterly serious, feeling her stomach clench with nervousness and fear.

Paige leaned over the table and smiled. "Don't be afraid. It's just me."

"I know, that's what scares me. I've been running from this for so long...I don't know what to do."

Paige nodded, knowingly. "Would you mind if we left?" she asked Madison.

"No...do you want to go somewhere else? Or...do you need to go home?" she asked, not wanting to let her out of her sight.

"I just want to get out of here and go somewhere quiet," Paige said.

"Do you...do you want to go to my house?" Madison asked, feeling her stomach roll with nerves so violently that she thought she might throw up.

"Yes, that's exactly where I want to go."

"Then that's where we'll go," Madison smiled back.

Madison stood up and kept Paige's hand tightly in hers as they walked out of the club. She walked her to Leah's car.

"Drive safely," she said, and not being able to resist, kissed her on the lips again softly.

The entire drive home, Madison was a bundle of nerves. She kept replaying the words Paige had said to her, their kiss...the feelings they created inside her. She had never, ever felt anything like this. Ever. Nothing had ever felt so right. As scared as she was she couldn't wait to get home and see Paige again, who, as she kept checking in the rearview mirror, was still following behind her.

Finally, they pulled up to her house and Madison rushed back to her side. Paige followed her into the house and into the living room.

"Do you want anything? A drink? Are you hungry?" Madison asked, feeling awkward. Paige had slipped off her shoes and was standing lower to the ground now. Madison looked at her and they both grinned nervously. Paige stepped closer and ran her fingers through Madison's hair, making her shiver.

"All I want is for you to hold me," she whispered, and Madison nodded. She led her to the couch by the hand and kicked off her own shoes, sitting down. Paige sat beside her, curling her long legs up beneath her, and Madison felt another moment of panic as she looked over at her. She was so beautiful...this couldn't be real. She couldn't believe this was happening. But it was. She could touch her, hold her...and oh...she wanted to hold her so much it hurt.

She put her arm around Paige's shoulder, pulling her gently against her. Paige moved closer, laying her head on her shoulder. She picked up Madison's hand, still holding hers, and brought it to her lips, kissing it softly. She looked up at Madison through her dark lashes, shyly, and Madison's heart pounded loudly in her chest.

After a few moments, she lay back on the couch, stretching out, and pulled Paige down beside her. Madison wrapped her arms around her and held her close. It felt...so amazingly good, just to hold her. She hadn't allowed herself to touch her other than a few hugs since the hospital.

Paige buried her face in Madison's neck, sighing in contentment. "I've missed this," she whispered after several minutes. "It's my favorite place in the whole world," she added.

Madison kissed the top of her head. "I've missed it too. I can't tell you how badly I've wanted to hold you for...so long," she said, her arms squeezing Paige closer to her. Paige lifted her head up.

Their lips moved closer together at the same time, and met softly, hesitantly, at first. Madison was soon lost to the kisses, allowing Paige to set the tone, giving her full access to her mouth, her lips, her tongue. She moaned softly as she felt the tip of Paige's tongue run along her bottom lip and then press gently further, probing inside her mouth and seeking her own tongue. She felt a shock as their tongues met, exploring and moving against each other, and a deep ache as Paige sucked her tongue inside her mouth, feeling the heat surround her and the warm wetness envelope her. Paige's body moved against her, her tongue growing more and more insistent. They pulled away gasping and Madison was startled by the look on Paige's face. Her eyes were glowing with desire and passion, and Madison had to resist the urge to grab her face and pull her down to kiss her again.

"Are you ok?" Madison asked, her hand coming up and caressing Paige's face softly.

"God, yes" Paige whispered, hoarsely. "Are you?" she asked, with a slight grin.

Madison smiled. "Yes, I have never been more ok than I am right now." Paige lowered her head again and nestled it into Madison's neck. Madison's hands moved up and started rubbing her back softly, her fingers trailing up to touch the soft skin on back of her neck. She felt a thrill at being able to touch her, just like this. She had to keep reminding herself this wasn't a dream, she really could hold her and touch her like this.

She had never felt her body respond to anyone this way, the aching need, jolts of pleasure from the smallest touches. It amazed and scared her at the same time. She couldn't get enough of this, not ever. She would always want more, need more.

The power Paige had over her was incredible. There was no way she could ever go back now, no way to deny or resist this. It was as if her whole life had led up to this moment, and there was nothing she would rather do than hold her in her arms like this.

"Madison?" Paige asked, breaking through her frenzied thoughts.

"Yes?" she asked, looking down at her.

"What made you decide to reassign my case that day?" she asked. Madison hesitated, feeling old feelings of guilt and shame wash over her, but she didn't want to be anything but honest with Paige, not now.

"I...I had a dream about you."

"What kind of dream?" Paige asked, smiling and raising her head to look at her. Madison covered her face with her hands.

"Just...a dream," she said, mortified.

"Ohhh...*that* kind of dream? Doctor!" Paige said, pulling a shocked face.

"No not *that* kind of dream. I mean...well...it was just...about the gym," Madison explained, not wanting Paige to think any worse of her than she might already.

"Oh. The gym," Paige teased. "When I attacked you. Ah, well...I've had several dreams about that myself," she admitted, and leaned up to kiss Madison on the cheek.

She contemplated Madison's revelation for a few moments.

"You are very noble, Madison. And very, very stubborn," she added.

Madison sighed. "I didn't feel very noble, believe me. I felt horrible. That wasn't what you needed, and I knew it. I always wanted the very best for you, Paige," she added softly.

"I have the very best," Paige replied, and kissed her again, soft and sweet, briefly.

After another hour of holding each other, they finally got up, and she regretfully kissed Paige goodnight. Paige paused just outside the front door. She looked at Madison.

"I've noticed you always wait for me to get into the car or inside the apartment before you leave," she said, quietly.

"I can't bear to think of anything happening to you," Madison choked out, pain etched in her eyes. Paige stepped back inside and put her hand on Madison's face.

"I won't let anything happen to me, Madison. I have way too much to live for. Especially now. But I adore that you watch over me." She said, hooking her hand around Madison's neck and pulling her close, kissing her once more. Madison smiled sheepishly as they drew apart.

"Always," she said, and Paige smiled one of her dazzling smiles that hit Madison right in the stomach.

"Goodnight," Paige said and walked down the pathway to her car. She turned and smiled as she unlocked the door and got in, locking it behind her. Madison smiled back, watching until the car lights were out of sight.

I'm Home

Madison got the text a while later. She texted back:

Good. But I miss you already

I miss you too.

Madison swooned, feeling like a lovesick fool. She *was* a lovesick fool, she reminded herself. She typed one more text out and sent it.

Sweet dreams

Paige rang up the last customer and then went to flip the closed sign on the front door. She hurried to count the cash in the till and took the bag of money to the back.

"What's wrong with you?" Rob asked as she quickly stuffed the money in the safe and ran around closing up. "You've been a basket case all day," he added, peering at her closely.

"Nothings wrong, I'm just in a hurry. Madison is picking me up at home in an hour," she said, rinsing out her coffee cup in the sink.

"Ohhh, reallly," Rob said, his interest perked. Paige tried to ignore him but felt her ears getting hot.

"We're just going to a movie at the Harvard Exit," Paige said, defensively.

"You have a date!" Rob said, pouncing on her and spinning her around. "Don't you?" he demanded.

Paige sighed, trying to force the grin off her face. She didn't need to say anything, and Rob gave her a quick hug.

"I'm so happy for you darling. Although I know a bunch of lesbians who won't be," he added, wistfully.

"I knew you had a thing for her when she came into the store that day. I've never seen you glow like you did after she left," he said, fondly. Paige blushed and picked up her backpack.

"Yeah, I guess I do have a thing for her," Paige agreed, letting herself beam now.

"Well have fun and don't do anything I wouldn't do. Which isn't a lot!" Rob called after her as she dashed from the room.

When Madison's car pulled up, Paige ran downstairs before she even had a chance to walk up to get her.

"Hi," Paige said, feeling bashful suddenly.

"Hi," Madison said, grinning, pulling her close for a hug. "I've missed you," she whispered.

"Me too," Paige said. It had only been three days since the club, but it felt like an eternity.

"Ready?" Madison asked, and Paige nodded and got into the car.

"How's school going?" Madison asked as they drove.

"Pretty good," Paige said. "Now that my muse is back in full force," she added, and Madison smiled, embarrassed.

"Work has been hell this week," Madison confided.

"Why?" Paige asked, looking concerned.

"Because I keep zoning out in the middle of my appointments, I am so completely distracted." Madison said.

"Distracted? Why are you distracted?" Paige asked, innocently.

"Oh I don't know...some mysterious dark haired, blue eyed girl that tortures my every waking-and sleeping moment."

Paige grinned, not at all sorry.

"I'm sorry to hear that. It sounds horrible," she laughed.

"It's ok. I hear torture is good for the soul."

At the theatre, Madison insisted on buying the tickets and popcorn and drinks.

"You have to let me pay for something," Paige argued. Madison leaned closer as they stood in line and whispered in her ear.

"This is our first real date...I've got to practice this whole wooing thing, so behave."

Paige smiled and bit her lip, but didn't push the issue anymore. They sat near the back of the theatre, and when the lights went down there were only a dozen or so other people in the theatre with them. The movie was in French with English subtitles, but Paige only caught a little of what they were saying, she was so flustered. She wasn't sure how comfortable Madison was with being affectionate in public, so she sat in her chair stiffly at first, trying to watch the movie and behave.

After about 15 minutes had gone by, she couldn't stand it anymore and she picked up Madison's hand in hers, intertwining their fingers, as she set their hands on her lap. Paige looked over at her and smiled, seeing Madison watching her and not the movie.

"What did they just say?" Madison whispered.

"I have no idea," Paige said, shrugging helplessly, and they both laughed quietly and turned back to the screen.

Paige followed the movie for the most part, but even when her eyes were on the screen, all she was aware of was the warm hand enclosing hers, and Madison's thumb stroking her hand softly. It was sheer bliss. As the movie let out and they walked outside, Madison kept hold of her hand.

"Do you want to walk around a bit, or...would you rather not?" Madison asked her as they got outside. It was dark, and she looked like she wasn't sure if Paige would be comfortable.

Paige smiled at her reassuringly. "It's fine. I know a really good ice cream place down the block,

but you have to let me pay," she said, firmly.

"Ok. I suppose I could let you get away with that."

They walked hand in hand down the street.

"Are you sure you're ok with this?" Paige asked as they walked slowly, holding up their joined hands.

"Holding your hand? Are you kidding me? I'm going to make every woman- and maybe a few men around here green with envy. I can hardly wait," Madison beamed.

Paige laughed.

"Am I the first girl you've ever held hands with?" she asked. Madison felt her face grow hot.

"You're the first girl I've ever...anything with," she said, in a low voice, and Paige glanced over at her, and smiled.

"Hmmm. I kinda like that," She said, smugly. Madison laughed.

They found the ice cream shop and ordered cones, and went to sit down at a booth across from each other. Madison ordered chocolate and Paige ordered mint chocolate chip. They talked about the movie, what they caught of it at any rate, and Paige watched as Madison ate her ice cream. Her lips mesmerized her as they sucked at the frozen treat, her pink tongue darting out to catch the melting drips that started running down the sides of the cone. Madison looked up and caught her staring with a stunned sort of look on her face, and smiled.

"You'd better concentrate on your own cone, or it's going to melt all over your hand in a minute," Madison teased. Paige looked down and saw her green ice cream quickly losing its form. She made a few feeble attempts to eat it, but she had lost all interest in it by now, preferring to watch Madison instead. She wasn't making matters easier, either, as she obviously ran her tongue slowly around the base of the ice cream where it met the cone, causing Paige's stomach to flutter and her heartbeat quicken. Madison licked her lips, getting all the ice cream off them. Paige closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

Madison met her eyes and looked at her innocently.

"What? I'm just eating my ice cream you were sweet enough to buy me," Madison protested.

"Unlike some people I know," she said, disapprovingly, as Paige's ice cream ran in streams down the cone and onto her hand. Paige looked down and grinned sheepishly. She moved the dripping cone to her other hand, and seeing all the green drops of melted ice cream on her hand, brought it to her mouth and began to lick it off, one drop at a time, not looking up to meet Madison's

shocked expression.

"Hmmm...it *is* pretty good ice cream," Paige remarked as she cleaned the last of it from her hand.

"Are you quite done?" Madison asked, an edge of pleading in her voice.

"Not even close," Paige said.

They finally gave up on finishing their cones and dumped them in the trashcan on their way out. They strolled back to Madison's car and she unlocked Paige's door and opened it for her. Paige leaned over and kissed her on the cheek before she sat down.

As they pulled up to Leah's apartments, Madison turned the car off and turned to look at her.

"Have I told you tonight how breathtaking you are?" she asked.

Paige answered her by leaning over and kissing her hard, the contact long overdue and they both sighed into it, quickly giving into the desires and need they had been feeling all night.

Madison tasted mint on her lips and brought one hand up and cupped her face as she kissed her tenderly, needing more contact. When they pulled back for much needed air, Paige dipped her head down and kissed down Madison's jaw, down to her neck, and Madison laid her head back, giving her easier access. Paige sucked the warm skin into her mouth, drawing a low moan from Madison as she felt her hands in her hair, urging her on, and Paige responded quickly, biting gently at the skin she was sucking, moving to yet another spot and repeating the action again.

Madison hands finally drew her head back up, her lips covering Paige's in a hungry kiss that Paige felt deep down inside her, and then sucking and biting on her bottom lip until they both pulled away reluctantly.

Madison stroked Paige's jaw line with her fingertips. "You are so beautiful it hurts."

"I had a really, really nice time tonight," Paige said, blushing at the compliment. "I think you have the wooing thing down, Doc."

"I had a good time too, even if you are a pain in the ass and drive me absolutely crazy," Madison smiled.

Paige smiled and leaned in and kissed her again, lingering as long as she could.

"I try," she whispered as she pulled away. "Goodnight," she said as she got out of the car.

"Goodnight," Madison said.

Paige walked up the stairs to the apartment, not needing to turn around to see if Madison was watching over her. She knew she was.

When Julia called and asked Madison to go sailing with them on Friday, she asked if Paige could come along too.

"Of course! You know I adore her." Came Julia's reply. When Madison and Paige showed up at the Marina at five o'clock, they walked down the Todd's boat hand in hand. Julia, already on the deck of the boat fiddling with the rigging, glanced up and saw them. She grinned and waved and as they got closer, she held out her hand to help them climb aboard.

She looked down at their entwined hands. "It's about time!" she exclaimed, shaking her head. "If I had to put up with your moping, pathetic ass for another three months I think I'd have to kill you," she added, rolling her eyes at Madison.

"You, on the other hand, I would keep," she grinned at Paige. She kissed them both on the cheek and then went back to readying the boat for sailing. Todd came up from below deck and saw them standing there.

"Honey, come say hi to Maddie's girlfriend,." Julia yelled out over her shoulder. Todd beamed and walked over to them. He held out his hand to Paige.

"You must be Paige," he said, smiling at her. She shook his hand shyly and nodded.

"Paige, this is Julia's better half, Todd," Madison introduced them. "How have you been, you big lug?" she asked Todd, hugging him.

"Not bad, can't complain. I have been itching to get out on the water for weeks now," he said, looking around at his boat. "Have you ever been sailing, Paige?" he asked.

"No, I haven't," Paige replied, looking a little nervous.

"Well you're in for a treat," Todd assured her. "Hopefully you won't get seasick," he added, not so comfortingly. "There are life jackets under the seats over there if you want to wear one. Not that you'll need it," he grinned, walking away. Madison squeezed her hand.

"Are you sure you're ok with all this?" she whispered, turning to look at her.

"Yes! I've always wanted to go sailing," she said, eagerly. Madison smiled and kissed her lips softly.

Paige looked at her. "So...am I?" she asked, bashfully.

"Are you what?" Madison asked, looking confused.

"Your girlfriend," Paige asked, biting her bottom lip nervously.

Madison smiled. "Yes...I think you are. If you want to be, I mean," she said, nervously. Paige smiled and put her arms around her neck, kissing her in reply.

"Oh, so *that's* how it's going to be," they heard Julia say teasingly behind them. They broke away and both looked chagrined. "Well, at least Todd will have to give up his quest to get you into bed," she said with a heavy sigh, and Madison laughed. Paige looked a little alarmed but Julia nudged her in the arm.

"Just teasing, Paige. We like to joke around a lot but I promise he doesn't bite." Paige smiled, and hooked her arm through Madison's, possessively.

"He better forget about it because that is never gonna happen," she stated firmly. Julia threw her head back and laughed.

"Maddie, I like her! You better keep her happy."

"I'll try," Madison smiled, shaking her head at the two of them.

After a few minutes of preparation, they went out on the water, Todd using the motor until they were out of the harbor. Paige walked up to the bow of the boat and sat down on the bench, holding onto the rail and looking out at the blue sparkling water and the green mountains in the background. Mt. Rainer was clearly visible in the distance, its majestic white peaks standing sentinel over Puget Sound. The wind whipped her hair back from her face and she had a peaceful, serene look on her face.

Madison was standing near the center of the boat, watching her, and Julia came up to her.

"How did this happen?" she asked.

"It's a long story," Madison said, "Let's just say that she opened my eyes to my stupidity." She smiled at Julia.

"I'm sorry, I love to harass you hon. But I really am so happy for you," she said, giving Madison another peck on the cheek.

"I know. Thank you, Julia," Madison glanced at her friend and then back over at Paige.

"How are you handling it?" Julia asked her.

Madison smiled. "I've never been this happy. I don't know what to do with myself," she laughed.

"Enjoy it. Cherish it...she is something special," Julia said in a rare moment of seriousness.

"I know it," Madison assured her, and walked over to Paige. She sat behind her and wrapped her arms around the girl's waist, surprising her. Paige turned her head and smiled at her, putting her hands over Madison's.

"It's amazing out here," Paige gushed happily. "I could sit here for hours and watch the water."

"I could sit here for hours and watch you," Madison said softly, into her ear. Paige grinned and pulled her arms around her tighter.

Madison nuzzled her face into Paige's hair, kissing her neck. Madison realized that she had never been comfortable being publicly demonstrative with anyone before, not even around Julia. Somehow now she couldn't care less, and she wasn't able to resist being near her, touching her. Even Julia's constant ribbing couldn't deter her.

They all had lunch on deck, Julia packed a picnic for them and they all talked and laughed, enjoying the beautiful scenery around them and the company. After lunch, Todd got up and turned to Paige.

"Do you want to learn how to sail?" he asked her. She looked a little startled, glancing over at Madison who was smiling encouragingly at her. "It's a lot of fun," he added, temptingly.

"Ok," Paige said, and swung her legs around the bench, following him.

It tugged at Madison's heart as she watched them, Todd pointing to the various pulleys and ropes and explaining how they worked. Paige looked fascinated and in no time, she was working the lines, watching in wonder as the boat turned and changed directions with the wind as she worked with Todd.

Madison felt a surge of gratitude for Todd, thinking about what a great guy he was and how good it was for Paige to have nice and safe interactions with a man. She chided herself for letting her inner therapist out and turned back to Julia.

"So, have you two...you know," Julia said, a wicked grin on her face.

Madison smacked her on the arm. "Julia, don't! And for the record, NO. Don't mention it, I might be sick," Madison said, looking ill.

"Well I know you aren't seasick. What's the matter? She wants you, you want her..." Julia went on, ruthlessly. Madison groaned and covered her face with her hands.

"Julia, I mean it. Shut up. You...don't understand. I am terrified," she said, looking up at her friend. Julia saw how serious she was.

"I'm sorry Maddie. I was just teasing...god, you are so cute. Don't be terrified. It'll be ok," she said, rubbing Madison's back comfortingly.

Madison didn't respond, but took a few deep gulps of fresh air to steady herself. Julia couldn't know, didn't know why it was so terrifying for her. She felt the fear clenching inside her stomach. It was something she pushed out of her mind constantly even though it was always there, nagging at her. She was petrified of thinking about being intimate with Paige, even though her body was begging, pleading for more whenever they were together.

There was the fact that she had never been with a woman in that way, before...but that wasn't the real fear. She knew enthusiasm and instinct would make up for whatever she didn't know. It was Paige that scared her. She was afraid *for* her. How could she ever touch her...like that...after what she had been through? What if she didn't ever want Madison to touch her? She couldn't stand the thought of hurting or scaring her. Paige didn't seem jumpy at all, she had never pulled away from her. But still. The pressure was enormous and Madison hadn't even really contemplated all the implications yet.

It should have helped that she was a psychiatrist but somehow...now it didn't. If anything it made it worse. She knew how hard it might be for Paige...and she knew all the things that could go wrong.

She pushed the thoughts aside yet again, and returned to enjoying their afternoon on the boat. There would be plenty of time for agonizing over this later, she knew.

Paige came back over to her, cheeks pink, hair windblown and her eyes sparkling.

"Have fun?" Madison asked her, smiling in spite of herself seeing how happy Paige looked.

"Yes!" Paige said, sitting down beside her. "I always thought it would be so complicated but it's really pretty simple!" she said.

Madison laughed. "Well I've been sailing with them for years and I've never gotten a lesson from Todd. You must be special."

"Well, once I learn a little more I'd be happy to show you the ropes," Paige said, her lips curling in a teasing smile as she leaned in and kissed her. Madison didn't miss the added meaning.

"A Book called desire," Paige answered the phone at work on Saturday morning.

"Hi there," Madison said.

"Hey you!" Paige said, surprised to hear her on the work phone. "Are you calling to special order some rare smutty lesbian erotica book?" she asked, swinging her legs on the stool she was

perched on and grinning into the phone.

"No!" Madison exclaimed, sounding horrified. "I was calling to ask if you were sick of me yet."

"Sick of you? I don't think that's possible," Paige said.

"Well good. Because I was really hoping you'd agree to dinner over here tonight, and you don't even have to cook," Madison teased.

"Wow, that is a tempting offer," Paige exclaimed. "But if I'm not cooking, who is? Julia has warned me off your cooking."

"I thought we could let Chang's cook tonight."

"Oh, I love Chinese," Paige said enthusiastically. "Ok, you talked me into it. But only if I get a fortune cookie."

Madison laughed. "Do you know how adorable you are? You can have my fortune cookie too." She promised.

"Okay. It's a date." Paige said. "Is it a date?" she asked, she asked, hopefully.

"Absolutely," Madison said. "Bring your jammies and we can lounge around and watch a movie too," she said.

Paige felt her stomach flip at the mention of bringing pajamas.

"Ok," she said. "I'll see you later."

"Bye sweetheart," Madison said, and hung up.

Paige sat there beaming at the term of endearment.

When Paige arrived, Madison opened the door wearing pink silk pajamas and pink fuzzy slippers. Paige laughed and shook her head.

"What? I said we were going to have jammie night. Did you bring yours?"

"Yes," Paige laughed. "I just didn't want to wear them here. What if a cop pulled me over?"

"Then they wouldn't have the heart to ticket you, I bet," Madison said. Paige went into the bathroom to change and she came out a few minutes later looking shy. Madison looked up from

the fireplace as she walked back into the living room.

"Oh my god," she said, "You are so adorable," she grinned. Paige was wearing purple flannel Eeyore pajamas, with a matching top and bottom. She wore purple fuzzy socks to go with it. Madison shook her head, banishing the thought that she looked about twelve from her head, and walked over to her.

"You're all fuzzy and warm like a teddy bear," she said as she held her. Paige ran her hand over Madison's back, feeling the silky smooth fabric.

"You feel silky and soft," she said, as she pulled back from the hug.

"I think I like jammie night," Paige said.

"I think I do too," Madison smiled.

They sat on the living room floor in front of the fire, eating Chinese food. Paige insisted that they only use chopsticks, so Madison wasn't sure if she was getting more food on the blanket she had laid out, or in her mouth. Finally, Paige took pity on her and held out a piece of beef with her chopsticks. Madison took the offering in her lips and chewed, smiling at her.

"You're good with those," Madison commented, still struggling with hers.

"Here, let me show you," Paige said, and covered Madison's hand with her own, manipulating her fingers to hold the chopsticks right.

"Now relax your hand," she said. "Relax...you're not trying to kill the food before you eat it. Just hold it loosely and move your fingers to pinch the chopsticks together," she said, patiently showing Madison again. Madison tried several times and finally got a few grains of rice in her mouth.

"Well, it's one way to diet...it'll take me all night just to eat a few bites of food," she laughed. Paige smiled affectionately at her and offered her another bite with her chopsticks.

She found it strangely erotic, feeding Madison like this, like she was the only means of nourishment that Madison had. She liked the feeling, and grinned as Madison gave up altogether and sat back, letting Paige select the food and feed her bite by bite. Paige alternated between feeding Madison and herself, until Madison said she was full. She picked up the fortune cookies, both of them, and placed them in her hand.

"I think you've definitely earned them," she said, smiling. Paige smiled and excitedly tore off the plastic and broke one open. She read it aloud.

"You will travel by sea and find great fortune"

"That one is a little late I think," Paige said. "Besides I found my good fortune on dry land," she added, gazing at Madison, making her smile.

"Here, you open yours, I think its bad luck to open two," Paige said, thrusting the other cookie at Madison as she crunched hers up.

Madison broke it open and read it aloud too.

"You are about to embark on a most delightful journey."

Paige couldn't help laugh. Madison's red face was just too precious.

"You find that funny, do you," Madison growled.

"I'm sorry," Paige gasped. "It did strike me as ah, very amusing and appropriate!" she added, sitting up and trying to stifle her laughter. Madison looked at her reproachfully.

Paige scooted closer and wrapped her arms around her. "Well, I do think it's a delightful journey," she said.

"I do too."

Madison kissed Paige on the nose. They cleaned up their dinner mess, carrying the food into the kitchen. Madison went to wash up the few spoons and glasses they had used as Paige put the leftovers away. She closed the fridge and watched Madison at the sink. A smile broke over her face as she recalled the first dinner there at Madison's house when she had longed to come up behind her and wrap her arms around her. She realized she could do it now. And so she did. She walked as quietly as possible over to her, slipped her arms around her waist and pulled her back into her, pressing her body into her.

Madison jumped slightly, surprised, and then relaxed into her embrace.

"Well hello," Madison murmured, leaning back into Paige's body with a sigh.

"Hi there," Paige smiled, and nudged Madison's hair aside from her neck as she moved in to kiss her there. She breathed her in, smelling shampoo and perfume and...her. Madison. She pulled her closer to her and kissed her soft skin again, all along her neck, until she heard a sigh from Madison's lips. Paige lifted her head up and saw that Madison was still holding onto a spoon, the water running, but had forgotten what she was doing. She pulled away reluctantly.

They went back out to the living room and Madison put on "Bringing up Baby" when Paige said she had never seen it.

"Katherine Hepburn is hysterical in it, you have to see it," Madison urged. Paige agreed happily.

Madison threw armfuls of pillows down on the floor, onto the blanket.

"This way you won't be falling off the couch," she explained.

"I didn't mind hanging onto you," Paige said, and Madison laughed.

"You can still hang onto me," she said, and beckoned for Paige to lie down on next to her. She happily crawled over to her, laying her body out alongside hers and draping an arm over her waist. The fire Madison had started earlier was burning low but it was warm enough that they didn't need blankets.

The movie started and Paige was soon laughing and completely absorbed in it. Madison, who had seen the movie dozens of times, was more absorbed with the woman in her arms. She kept glancing at her, at the arm draped so casually over her stomach, reminding herself that it wasn't all a dream. She was overwhelmed and so happy she didn't fight the urge to brush Paige's cheek with her lips.

Paige turned her face to look at her, a smile on her lips at the sudden display of affection. She turned her body more so she was lying face to face with Madison, away from the movie. She reached up, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind Madison's ear.

"You make me so happy."

"I love making you happy," Madison replied. Paige leaned in placed a soft kiss at the corner of Madison's mouth, and then another one on the opposite corner. She brushed her bottom lip across her top lip, so lightly Madison almost couldn't feel it. She let out a gasp when she felt the tip of Paige's tongue tracing her bottom lip, and then her top lip, pressing a feather light kiss again at one corner of her mouth.

"God," Madison whispered. "What are you doing?"

Paige pulled back, smiling. "Doing what makes me happy," she said, and returned to tormenting Madison's mouth, lapping lightly at her lips until she felt a tongue venture out to meet hers, sucking on the tip of Madison's tongue for a moment before releasing it and kissing her agonizingly lightly, teasingly. She pulled back again and watched as Madison breathed hard, her eyes closed. She opened them and saw Paige looking at her.

"Please," Madison whispered, pleadingly.

"Please what?" Paige asked, leaning down closer to her face again.

"Please kiss me," Madison begged, needing to feel a real kiss, the firm contact she was craving, needing, as all the light kisses and touches left her needing more.

"I thought I was," Paige whispered, and covered her mouth with hers again, this time deep and hard, her tongue sliding past Madison's lips and thrusting inside insistently, the relief of the contact causing Madison to moan.

Madison's hands went to the back of Paige's head, holding her close, not wanting her to stop. She let go immediately when she realized what she was doing, not wanting to scare her, and lay back, letting Paige do as she wanted, slowly, with long, lingering kisses, suckling on Madison bottom lip and nibbling gently.

"Like that?" Paige asked, pulling away and panting lightly.

"Yes..." Madison nodded. "Just like that."

Paige dipped her head back down, the fire in her growing steadily, as she covered Madison's mouth again with her own, and as she kissed her slowly, her hand found its way to Madison's side. She began stroking her fingers over the silky material. It felt so nice, so silky soft Paige couldn't stop touching her and her hand slid upward, along her side and then back down, over the silk pajamas. She ran her hand back up over her ribcage and a little higher, and heard a small whimper from Madison as her hand brushed up over the outer curve of her breast.

Paige realized with a jolt that she wasn't wearing a bra...her hand roamed across the area again, across her ribcage and letting her fingertips lightly trail across that soft edge as her hand grew bolder. She hesitantly drew her fingertips over the silky material and dragged them across the swell of Madison's breast, one fingertip gliding over a hard, pert nipple.

She felt Madison's body respond, squirming beside her, and it excited her. She felt her own heart rate quicken, and a subtle throbbing between her legs as her tongue continued to explore Madison's mouth, her fingertips returning to where they had just been, until she felt that round, firm nipple again.

Paige brought her thumb and forefinger together, squeezing lightly on the nipple through the pink fabric. Madison moaned into her mouth and writhed under Paige's hand and Paige felt the throbbing between her legs grow more insistent. She kept a steady pressure on Madison's nipple in a gentle grip, rubbing it softly between her finger and thumb, feeling it harden and respond to her touch. She twisted it and tugged gently, and Madison's mouth broke free from hers as she gasped loudly.

"Oh, god," she moaned, catching her breath, her hands clenched into fists beside her head as she restrained herself. Paige wanted so much to feel the pebbled nipple between her teeth, and she took this opportunity and lowered her head, replacing her fingers with her mouth. She sucked the

nipple into her mouth, through the fabric, feeling silk and the protruding flesh as she sucked, her motions becoming harder and surer.

Paige released the nipple, the fabric darker there now and wet. She took the nipple between her teeth and grazed it lightly, almost imperceptibly, though Madison definitely was aware of it as she cried out.

"Mmmmm yes...please, Paige..."

This spurred her on and she gave into the craving to bite down gently, scraping her teeth over it, tugging it gently with her teeth. She felt the heat and wetness between her own legs grow, and the ache to relieve the throbbing became almost painful. She moved one leg over Madison's, and as she nibbled the hard nipple between her teeth, thrust down against her thigh, her hips rocking.

Paige moaned loudly at the contact and released the nipple from her teeth roughly, pressing her hips down again against the glorious firm thigh. Madison lifted her leg up slightly to meet her movements, and Paige felt the pleasure course through her with every thrust, and suddenly it was too much.

She pulled her leg back, with a groan of frustration at herself. She lay her head on Madison's chest, breathing hard, trying to control the swirl of emotions and desires coursing through her. She felt Madison's arms wrap around her, holding her close. After a minute, Paige lifted her head and scooted up a few inches, finally looking up to meet Madison's eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said, painfully, lowering her head in shame.

"Paige, come here," Madison whispered, and she moved up further and closer, allowing Madison to hold her.

"Please don't be sorry, ever...for wanting to touch me, or for needing to stop." Madison whispered stroking her hair. Paige looked up again, needing to see her face.

"I want you so much," Paige breathed, still struggling with the desperate ache.

"I want you too," Madison said, swallowing hard. "And I have you, right here in my arms. That is all I need. You make me happy, Paige, just being able to hold you and be close to you. I will never do anything, or want you to do anything, unless you're ready for it. And I want you to promise me that you will stop whenever you need to. Show me, let me know when you do want more. I want to be with you, in any way I can, and I only want to do things that feel good and make you happy. Okay?"

Paige nodded, and smiled softly. "I promise," she said, earnestly. She struggled to find words to describe all she was feeling, but couldn't find them. She compensated by leaning up and kissing Madison again.

"Please hold me," Paige asked her, and Madison smiled and held her closer, pressing a kiss to her

forehead.

They eventually turned back to the movie, only halfheartedly interested in it, and when it ended Paige sat up, yawning and stretching.

She looked down at Madison, still lying down. She looked thoughtful, and a little worried.

"What are you thinking?" Paige asked her, picking up her hand and kissing the top of it softly.

"I wanted to ask if you wanted to stay...sleep here, tonight, but I didn't want you to think I was implying anything," Madison said, looking troubled. "I just don't want you to go."

Paige smiled. "I was kind of thinking the same thing. I would love to stay," she said.

"I never sleep in my bedroom," Madison said. "But if you want we can go sleep in there and...can I just hold you?" she asked.

"Yes, please," Paige said, "I want that so much."

Madison closed up the house for the night and got them each some water, and led Paige down the hall to her bedroom. It seemed strange to be in there, and even stranger pulling back the blankets and getting into bed, Paige crawling in alongside her.

As Madison covered them both up and turned out the bedside lamp, Paige curled up against her, her face snuggled up to her neck, an arm and a leg draped over her. Madison smiled into the dark and pulled her closer, placing a random kiss somewhere on her hair.

Paige sighed deeply. She lay quietly for several minutes, enjoying the closeness.

"Thank you." she whispered fervently at last.

"What are you thanking me for?" Madison asked.

Paige turned her head a little, barely able to see Madison's face in the near dark.

"Don't you know that I have dreamed about this for almost as long as I've known you? Do you know how many nights I imagined this, wanted it, ached to just be able to go to you and sleep in your arms, knowing how safe and good it would feel?"

Madison quickly pulled her even closer.

"I do know. Because I wanted it too, so many times. But I know how much more you must have needed it...I wish I could have wrapped you up in my arms every night, Paige. If I could have, I would have...I hope you know that."

"I do," Paige said, and lay her head on Madison's chest as she cuddled up to her.

"You know I would never do anything that would hurt you," Madison asked her quietly.

"Of course I do." Paige said, listening to Madison's heartbeat. "I trust you with my life."

Madison smiled at the words.

"Good. Sweet dreams, sweetheart," she whispered, stroking Paige's hair and reveling in how perfect and amazing it felt, holding her in her arms.

"I know they will be," Paige murmured, sleepily.

Madison woke first, in the early morning light that streamed through her windows. Her first conscious thought was that Paige was in bed beside her. She felt her pressed up against her body before she was even fully awake. It was a very good way to start the day.

She shifted a little so she could look at her sleeping. Paige stirred a little, rolling onto her back. Madison watched her face, using her eyes instead of her fingers to trace over each feature, every single inch of skin. She looked so content, so peaceful. The dark eyebrows, relaxed and gently curved. Her eyelids, hiding that brilliant sky blue color that always made Madison's breath catch in her throat when she looked into them. Her adorable nose, lightly sprinkled with freckles, those lips...she shivered as she recalled Paige's teasing kisses the night before. She definitely knew how to use those lips. The little indentation below her mouth, on her chin. Madison longed to kiss it, but resisted, not wanting to wake her.

Her eyes moved downward and Paige's head was laying back, her throat exposed. Madison's eye caught the long white scar along the soft pink skin. She was unable to look away, feeling pain tear through her as she gazed at it. For so long she had refused to let her emotions dictate how she saw and treated Paige, not wanting it to affect her ability to help her. Now...now everything was different. This wasn't some patient. This was *her* Paige. Hers. She loved her. She paused at this thought.

I love her. I mean of course I love her; I have loved her for so long. But I am in love with her. Love her love her, want to spend the rest of my life with her love her.

Madison felt the overwhelming shock and the joy of this revelation all at once. She realized she had never felt this way about anyone, ever. It was mind blowing.

She looked back at the scar on her throat. An image came unwillingly into her head of how it got there. She felt a wave of nausea overcome her. What if they had slit her throat? Killed her? She would never have known her. Never known what a loss it was. Never would have known love, like this.

She felt the pain of this thought acutely as she looked down at her. She stifled a sob, tears rolling down her cheeks. If she only could have been there. If she could have stopped them. If she could have taken her place, she gladly would have. She brought her lips down without thought, placing soft kisses along the jagged scar. Paige's eyes flew open, and as she moved slightly, Madison withdrew.

She blinked a few times, a little groggy. "Madison?" she asked, looking up at her. She saw the tears then, still wet on Madison's face. She sat up, looking worried.

"What's wrong?" she asked, moving her hand up and wiping at the tears.

Madison placed her hand over Paige's, still on her face.

"I love you," she said, softly, more tears making their way over their hands now.

"I love you so much, Paige," she said again. Paige put her arms around her, holding her close.

"I love you too," Paige said, fervently. She slowly pulled away, looking at Madison with concern.

"Why are you crying?" she asked. Madison just shook her head, unable to speak.

She finally swallowed hard, trying to regain control.

"I just want to take away everything that has ever hurt you, and it's so hard because...I can't," she finally admitted. "No matter what I do or how much I try I can never take that away."

Paige listened intently. She stroked Madison's hand.

"No, you can't. Nobody can. But Madison, you made me see that I am a survivor, that what I did to survive was okay. I'm glad I'm alive, I'm so happy that I chose life. My life is even more beautiful because you are in it. You said it could make me stronger and it *has*. Nobody is ever going to hurt me like that again, and...you love me. I feel like the luckiest girl in the world, and I wouldn't go back and change anything now." Madison looked up at her in horror.

"No, I know what you're going to say- but if I hadn't gone through that...I wouldn't have met you," Page said softly. "So don't hurt for me anymore, baby. Be happy for me because I *am* happy, you make me happy, and...I love you."

Madison gulped. Paige was comforting her. This was not the way it was supposed to go. But she heard everything Paige said and she finally looked up again, finding those eyes bearing into her soul.

"You are so amazing, do you know that? I am completely overwhelmed that you love me," Madison said.

Paige smiled. "I do love you, more than anything in this world. How could I not? You are the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I don't need anything else. Just you. That bad stuff is all in the past. You are my future."

Paige leaned over and kissed her, tenderly, devotedly, lovingly.

Madison smiled through her tears when she withdrew.

"Good morning?" she said, laughing softly.

Paige grinned. "I love waking up with you," she said. "Even if you are a crying mess."

"I promise I don't cry every morning," Madison assured her. "Are you hungry? I can make toast," she grinned.

"I *am* hungry, but not for toast," Paige said. She pushed Madison down onto the bed and lowered herself on her, laying the entire length of her body atop Madison's. They both sighed at the contact, as Paige lowered her head and kissed her. She made her way down her jaw, with small kisses, running her tongue down her throat and tasting her skin, sucking it into her mouth hungrily.

Paige lifted herself up slightly, resting some of her weight on her elbows. Even as she continued to place soft kisses on Madison's lips, she reached for Madison's hand and brought it up to her breast, pressing her palm into her through her flannel pajama top.

"Touch me, please," she breathed raggedly, and she whimpered as she felt Madison's hand enclose her breast, cupping her gently and caressing her through the fabric. Paige's breath hitched in her throat as she felt Madison's soft touches, her nipple straining for more contact.

"Please, go underneath," she begged softly, pushing Madison's hand under her top, and was rewarded with fingers brushing against her skin, searching out and then grasping her nipple, tugging and pulling gently. Madison moaned softly as she touched her. Her own hand slid down Madison's body and slipped underneath her silk top, sighing. She moved her hand across warm, soft skin, softer than the silk, and her hand sought out Madison's breast once again, this time with nothing to block her touch. She squirmed as she pinched Madison's firm nipple, now with her own fingers and not through fabric. It felt so good. She began imitating Madison's own touches on her nipple, twisting and tugging until they both gasped in unison.

Paige felt the fire return down between her legs, every touch of Madison's fingers on her causing a tug right down to her clit.

"God," Paige moaned, grinding her hips down helplessly. After several beautiful, agonizing moments, she finally withdrew her hand from beneath Madison's shirt and felt Madison release her nipple at the same time. Paige lowered herself down again, resting on Madison, and kissed

her once again, a soft, sweet, slow kiss, with a hint of the unfulfilled hunger still roaring inside her.

She laid her head on Madison's shoulder, nuzzling her neck and catching her breath. Madison's hands were stroking her back softly.

"This is so...torturous," Paige finally said, squirming again atop Madison. Madison laughed softly.

"Yes it is, but it is such sweet torture. You can torture me every day and I will be happy" she said.

"Yes but this...ache...never goes away," Paige complained, groaning.

"Paige?" Madison asked, suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you ever...I mean have you been touching yourself, pleasuring yourself?" Madison asked, curiously.

Paige felt her face grow hot. "No," she said, quietly.

"No...never? Or no not lately?" Madison asked.

"Not since...last year," Paige said. Madison breathed deeply and nodded.

"I wondered. Sweetheart...you know, you could touch yourself, and take care of this ache. On your own. It could be a really nice and safe way for you to...reconnect with yourself that way. And it could also keep you from going crazy," she added, smiling.

"Do you?" Paige asked, ignoring the rest of it, a slow grin spreading over her face at the thought.

Madison felt as if her sage Doctorly advice had been bypassed and turned on her, which it had.

"Well...not lately no," she answered slowly.

"Why not?" Paige persisted. Madison shook her head and looked away.

"Don't tell me you just haven't felt like it or I might be crushed," Paige added with a wry smile.

Madison glared at her. "That's no fair," she chided. "Of course I've felt like it...you drive me crazy! I haven't because...I know if I do I will be thinking about...you. And I don't feel right about that. I mean...if you aren't ready to do those kinds of things with me I would feel wrong imagining them."

"Hmmm, I see," Paige said, pondering this. She thought about Madison alone in her bed...naked...turned on and left frustrated by her. Her hand moving between her legs and touching herself, thinking about Paige. She pictured it all, down to Madison tensing up and crying out her name. She was getting wetter and more achy just thinking about it, and suddenly the idea of touching herself sounded pretty good.

"I'll tell you what Doc," Paige said. Madison groaned at the nickname being used at this moment. *God. Kill me now.*

"Yes?" she asked, patiently.

Paige leaned down over her, punctuating her next words with soft kisses.

"How about (kiss) I spend the morning with you (kiss) and drive you absolutely crazy, which will drive me absolutely crazy in the process (kiss) and when I go home, I promise, I will (kiss) touch myself. But only if you promise to do it too." Paige smiled, looking thoroughly pleased with herself.

"Oh god," Madison groaned. "You're planning on driving me crazier than I am right now?" she asked, feebly.

Paige nodded, her eyes gleaming mischievously.

"Ok," Madison finally said, weakly. She took a deep breath.

"So...do you want that toast *now*?" she asked.

Paige replied by lowering her head once more and kissing her soundly.

Madison lay in bed waiting, and jumped when she heard the buzz of her cell phone by her nightstand. She picked it up and there was a text from Paige.

-Did you start without me?

Madison closed her eyes, feeling the wetness flood between her legs as she thought of Paige and what she was about to do. She felt as nervous as a teenager. She texted back:

-No, I waited for you, just like you asked me to

-Good. I want to know you are touching yourself when I am.

Madison groaned, clutching the phone. *She is going to kill me*, she thought, desperately.

Another text beeped.

-I am so wet. Put the phone down. I'm starting now.

Madison dropped the phone and slid her hand down between her legs, crying out in relief as she pictured Paige touching herself.

Across town, Paige set her phone down and lay back in her bed, slowly moving her hand down to the insistent throbbing. She gasped softly at the copious wetness she found. She slid one finger between soaked lips and a wave of pleasure shot through her as she found her clit, swollen and stiff. So ready. She slowly rubbed it in circles, squeezing her eyes shut as she imagined Madison doing the same. It felt so...so good...Paige felt her hips thrust up, and her finger speed up its movement, as she imagined Madison feeling these same incredible sensations, her fingers moving on her clit, her hand coated in wetness just like this. She thought of Madison crying out, climaxing, and knowing she would be thinking of her.

Right now this very second she was doing this too, Paige knew...she knew it and it was too much, all the throbbing and aching and pressure had built up for so long...so very long. She pressed harder and rubbed frantically, Madison's name already murmured on her lips, and then she was exploding, the waves of pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Paige muffled her whimpers and bit her lip hard, her hips jutting up and her finger pressing hard on her throbbing clit, feeling the spasms rock her entire body. She finally collapsed back onto the bed, limp, withdrawing her hand and feeling herself shiver and twitch below.

After several moments, she languidly picked up the phone and dialed.

"Paige?" Madison answered, sounding breathless.

"Hi,"

"Are you ok, sweetheart?" Madison asked,

"Yes." Paige breathed.

"Did you...?" Madison asked, hesitantly.

"Yes," Paige said again, and this time Madison could hear the smile in her voice.

"God," Madison breathed, feeling a new ache rise up inside her.

"I thought of you the whole time," Paige murmured. "It felt so good."

"I'm so, so glad Paige," Madison said softly. "It did for me too" she added, smiling. "And I thought about you and it drove me crazy thinking about what you were doing."

"Good," Paige said. "That was the plan," she laughed.

"You have good plans."

"I wish you were here, now," Paige said quietly. "All I want is to lie in your arms right now."

"I know. I do too. I promise I will hold you as long as you want the next time I see you." Madison promised.

"Yes, please," Paige said, sounding happy. "I love you, Madison."

"And I love you, so very much," Madison said softly. She ached to hold her, but she was satisfied...for now. And hopeful.

"Get some rest. I'm so proud of you, you know," she said.

"Goodnight," Paige said.

They hung up, and Paige drifted off to sleep, her only thought that she wanted Madison to be the one who made her feel that way, the next time.

The weekdays were difficult, everyday tasks like work and school just seemed to be an obstacle to Madison and Paige's desire to be together. Thursday came and Paige was beside herself to see Madison.

At one o'clock, Madison got a text message.

-What are you doing for the next hour?

She smiled.

-Nothing, doing some paperwork until my next appointment at 2:30. Why?

There was a knock at her office door. Madison flipped the phone closed and went to answer it.

Paige was standing there, grinning and holding two brown paper sacks.

"Because I thought you might be willing to have lunch with me. Especially since I made it."

Madison laughed. "Yes, I would." She took the sacks, let her into her office, and closed the door. Madison set the bags down on her desk and turned back, going to hug her.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Madison said, holding her. "God I've missed you!"

"I've missed you too," Paige said, cupping her face with both hands and kissing her deeply. She pulled back, smiling.

"I always wanted to do that in your office and now I have," she said, looking very pleased with herself.

Madison smirked. "Pain in the ass," she said. "So that was just a victory kiss, not a kiss because you just wanted to?" she laughed. Paige smiled again and brought her hands back up to hold her face tenderly as she leaned in to kiss her again, longer and more slowly, her body pressing into Madison making her step back until she was leaning against the desk. Paige pulled away, a gleam in her eye.

"That was because I just wanted to," Paige said. "So was the one before," she added, running her hands down Madison's arms. Madison was breathless and speechless.

"And so is this," Paige said, and pushed Madison backward gently until she sat on the edge of her desk. She was wearing a black business skirt suit with a white button down shirt. Paige pushed the skirt up with both hands, higher up Madison's thighs until she had room to push her body between her legs. She pressed into her, claiming her mouth again, her hands in her hair. Madison moaned as Paige moved one hand down to her back and pulled her in closer, their bodies touching, Paige's hips pressed into her between her legs.

After several long, slow, deep kisses, Paige released her and stepped back, her eyes aglow with desire.

Madison's cheeks were very pink and her breath was coming in short pants. She stood up, tugging her skirt down and swallowing hard.

"You know, it's not every ex-patient of mine that I allow come into my office and have their way with me," she laughed, nervously.

"I should hope not," Paige said. "Does that mean I can have my way with you, doctor?" She asked, grinning evilly and moving forward a step. Madison flushed deeper.

"I thought you just did."

Paige just shook her head, smiling.

"So, are you hungry?" Paige asked, her voice low and meaningful.

Madison's eyes widened. She looked flustered and Paige couldn't help laugh softly. She adored teasing her.

"Do you like turkey sandwiches?" she asked, handing Madison a paper sack.

"Yes. I love them," Madison managed to say, still visibly shaken. They ate their sandwiches, whole wheat with turkey breast, lettuce, tomato, bacon and avocado slices, sitting at Madison's desk.

"Thank you for the sandwich...and the very, very surprising visit," Madison said, wiping the last of the crumbs from her lap and smiling at Paige.

"I just needed to see you."

"I did too," Madison admitted.

Paige got up and walked over to her chair. She pulled Madison up onto her feet and put her arms around her neck.

"Come away with me this weekend," she said, pleadingly.

"Away...where?" Madison asked.

"Rob owns a bungalow on Whidbey Island. He keeps telling me I should go use it, and I've never really wanted to or had a reason...until now," she said, shyly.

"What about work?" Madison asked.

"Rob owes me. I closed for him this week so he could take Dan to go see Wicked. Twice." They both laughed.

Madison looked thoughtful.

"Are you sure you want to spend two whole days with me?" she asked, partly in jest, and partly serious.

"Three days," Paige said, grinning. "You're your own boss, you said so. Can't you take Monday off too?" she pleaded, turning her large begging eyes on her. Madison felt her insides melt. She could always call and reschedule her Monday appointments. Right?

"Yes," she said, without thought. "Yes I would love to go away with you for three days," she said, kissing Paige on the lips.

"What about school?" Madison said, suddenly remembering.

"I can take one day off. And I don't work Mondays." Paige said confidently.

"God. I am so excited to spend all this time with you, you have no idea," Madison said, smiling up at Paige.

Paige smiled softly. "I think I do," she said. "It sounds amazing," she said.

"I'd better go before your appointment shows up."

"I'd rather spend the afternoon with you," Madison said, reluctantly.

"I will see you tomorrow night...and for the next three days and nights," Paige promised her.

"Yes, you will," Madison agreed happily. "Alright, I'll let you go. But only for now."

"Only for now," Paige repeated, and kissed her again longingly.

She left the office and Madison took the time before her client showed up to compose herself. She was still reeling from Paige's seductive, aggressive greeting. She thought about the weekend trip and felt her stomach flutter nervously. She wasn't sure if she was more excited or more nervous, but either way she couldn't help but be ecstatic.

She was going to have Paige all to herself for three days!

They took a ferry across the sound to Whidbey Island, and Paige bought them hot cocoa and urged Madison to walk around the sundeck with her so she could look at the water. As the ferry approached the Island, she turned to Madison.

"It's so beautiful," she breathed. "And so are you," she added, looking at Madison's hair tousled from the wind and her green eyes shining with happiness at her. Madison drew her close, hugging her. She kissed her neck.

"I adore you," Madison whispered.

Paige stayed in her arms until they had to go back down to the car.

After driving for about a half an hour, they finally found the bungalow. It was very private, requiring a key to enter the gate and then they had to drive down a long tree lined driveway. It

was a small structure, one story, surrounded by woods. There was a wrap around deck outside, with a large hammock.

They carried their bags inside and poked around, checking out their accommodations. There was a cute little kitchen, living room and bedroom with an attached bathroom.

It was small but clean and neat. Paige changed the bedding with clean linens she found in a closet and they threw all the windows open to air the place out.

"This place is so cute!" Paige exclaimed, as she poked around the cottage. She found a stash of board games and pulled out Pictionary.

"Will you play this with me?" she asked. Madison looked up and laughed.

"I hardly think that's fair, Ms. Artiste. I can't even draw a stick figure!"

Paige found some canned food in the pantry and made them some soup and crackers, which they ate at the small kitchen table.

"I'll go shopping tomorrow and make us something real," she promised.

Madison smiled, looking more than content to eat soup all weekend if need be.

"Let's go down to the beach before it gets dark," Paige begged, and Madison happily complied. They walked hand in hand down a stone pathway that led down to the beach, just a few hundred yards away. There was no one else on the beach, and Paige felt like they had the entire Island to themselves as they walked along the surf holding hands. The waves were a little rough and the water looked grey and stormy. She bent down and picked something up. She shined it on her shirt and handed it to Madison.

It was a rock, a green rock, the shape slightly resembling a heart. Madison held it in her hand, examining it.

"It's beautiful, Paige."

"It reminds me of your eyes," Paige said shyly.

Madison slipped it in her jeans pocket. "I love it, thank you," she said.

"I love you," Paige said, and wrapped her arms around Madison, pulling her close. She lowered her head and kissed her, feeling the rest of the world outside slipping away. The only thing in the world was right here, in her arms. Madison responded eagerly to the kisses as they deepened, her hands linked behind Paige's neck and pulling her closer still.

When they pulled apart, at last, Paige smiled contentedly at her.

"Thank you for coming here with me."

"There is nowhere else I'd rather be than here with you. Anywhere, as long as it is with you," Madison vowed.

They walked back to the bungalow at dusk, and Madison made them both some hot herbal tea. They played Scrabble, Paige finally admitting defeat when Madison used all 7 of her letters on a triple word score and was a good hundred points ahead of her.

They curled up on the couch together in front of the fire, watching the flames, and finally Madison laid back, Paige lying in her arms, both tired after the long day. Madison's fingers played with Paige's dark silky hair, running her fingers through it, stroking her softly. When Madison realized Paige had fallen asleep on her, she woke her gently and took her to bed, ignoring the protestations that she wasn't really tired.

"We have all weekend sweetie. Come to bed with me," Madison whispered. They took turns in the bathroom getting ready for bed, and Paige was asleep again in minutes after her head hitting the pillows. Madison lay awake for longer, her fingers stroking Paige's hair again and wondering how she ever got so lucky.

She was woken by soft kisses on the back of her neck. She was on her side and Paige spooned her from behind, her knees tucked into the crook of Madison's bent knees, her body tucked up snugly against her back, and her arm wrapped around Madison's hip, holding her close.

"Mmmmm," Madison murmured, "I like waking up like this."

"Good morning," Paige murmured against her neck, kissing and licking the soft skin there. Madison squirmed at the warm, wet strokes on her sensitive neck. Paige thrust her hips against her bottom and pressed back against her with a happy sigh.

She tightened her arm around Madison's waist and pulled her into her harder. She kissed a trail up her neck to her jaw, and her hand moved across her pajamas, slipping under the hem of the top, seeking skin. In a moment, her hand was covering Madison's breast and gently massaging it, as she continued placing soft wet kisses on her neck and behind her ear. Paige lazily traced her fingertips around Madison's nipple, feeling it pucker and the skin shrivel as it hardened. Madison squirmed against her. A finger and thumb closed around the now stiff nipple, rolling it and tugging gently. A soft gasp escaped from Madison's mouth.

She tried to turn over to kiss her but Paige held her firmly.

"Don't move, please," she begged. Madison stayed put, and squirmed more as Paige's hand continued its sweet torment of her breast. Paige was breathing near her ear and her tongue darted out, tracing along the outer edge of her ear, then licking behind it and drawing the earlobe into her mouth. She sucked it into her mouth, humming her pleasure into Madison's ear.

Madison could feel the gentle tug of Paige's lips around her flesh and all she could think of was that mouth sucking and tugging somewhere else. She moaned and writhed back against her, desperately. Paige finally released her earlobe and nipple, running her fingers all across Madison's soft stomach and around to the curve of her hip.

She placed another kiss on her neck and then rolled her over onto her back, kissing her hungrily.

She was kneeling up on the bed, straddling one of Madison's legs. Before Madison even knew what she was doing, Paige lifted her pajama top off and peeled it off, tossing it onto the floor. Madison's eyes grew wide with surprise, and then desire.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered, looking up at Paige's young, firm, rounded breasts, but not touching. Paige was breathing hard and she put her fingers on Madison's top pajama button.

"Please?" Paige whispered, seeking permission.

"Yes," Madison said. "Anything you want, my love."

Paige undid the buttons as quickly as her trembling fingers would allow, finally getting the last button undone. She parted the shirt and pulled the sides apart, revealing Madison's breasts to her eyes at last. Creamy white skin, pale pink nipples, hard and erect now, her breasts soft and full.

"You are perfect," Paige breathed. "So beautiful."

Paige reached out and caressed her breast with her palm, then the other. She took a deep shuddering breath as desire mixed with fear in her chest. Madison was looking up at her with so much love in her eyes, so much need. Paige felt the fear evaporate as she looked into the face and eyes she trusted more than anything else in this world.

"I love you," Madison said, and Paige smiled down at her. She lowered her body down on top of Madison, their bare breasts pressing against one another's.

"I love you too," Paige replied, before kissing her. She soon left Madison's mouth and began kissing her way down her neck, and chest, scooting her body lower until she was eye level with her breasts. She lapped tentatively at a nipple, and felt Madison take a deep breath.

She dragged her tongue across the nipple, glorying in the feel of it, the stiff flesh against her soft tongue. It was torment for her as well as Madison, and she licked and lapped at it until even she couldn't stand it any longer and took it into her mouth, sucking hard.

"Ohhh god," Madison groaned, her hands in Paige's hair, not pressing her down but just holding her head gently.

"That feels so...good," Madison moaned, as Paige flicked the tip of her nipple with her tongue and sucked again. Her teeth bit down gently, increasing the pressure and tugging until she heard a hiss above her and released it, quickly covering it with her mouth and sucking again softly. She released it once again and moved over to the other nipple, Madison squirming as the cool air hit her wet nipple but a warm mouth covered the other one.

Paige realized she was relieving her own throbbing need by grinding down into Madison's thigh, and she could feel how wet she was becoming against her pajama bottoms with every thrust. She wondered how wet Madison was and groaned at the thought.

Suddenly, she needed to know.

Her hand deserted Madison's breast and glided downward, over taut abdominal muscles and bellybutton, under the loose waistband of Madison's pajama bottoms. She felt silky panties beneath this and continued downward, over the smooth material and she felt Madison spread her legs apart, willing her silently on.

Paige's hand cupped her soft rounded mound, fitting perfectly in her palm as she pressed her fingers against the slight crease in the middle. Madison moaned and thrust upward to meet her hand. As Paige pressed inward through the thin material, she felt heat and dampness, and as she stroked and pressed in deeper she felt the wetness soak through to coat her fingertips.

"God Madison...you're so wet," Paige groaned softly.

Madison only whimpered in response, her body trembling. Paige moved her body up, keeping her hand where it was, and nuzzled into her neck.

"I want to feel you," Paige whispered. Madison nodded.

"Yes, please," she said, urgently.

Paige slid her hand back up and then underneath the waistband of her panties, moving back down over soft hair. Her fingers parted the wet curls and slipped inside, greeted by warm wetness and a soft cry from Madison's lips. With two fingers, she stroked down and back up, feeling the hard little nub of her clit as she grazed over it softly. The wetness was soaking her fingers and she spread it around, gliding easily through folds and feeling the warmth envelope her fingers.

Paige buried her face in her hair, kissing her neck softly. Her fingertips worked their way back down and sought the source of all the wetness, teasing it with the tips of her fingers, feeling the tight muscles clench and try to draw her inside.

Madison gasped, her hands going around Paige's back and clinging to her. Paige needed no other encouragement and she pressed her fingers in deeper, sliding inside her easily.

Madison cried out loudly and lifted her hips up to deepen the contact.

It was sheer bliss, being inside Madison for the first time. Paige moaned softly as she thrust in and out of her, grinding herself down on Madison's thigh in empathetic ecstasy. Paige sped up her movements, urged on by Madison's soft cries, sliding her fingers all the way out and stroking up over her clit and then plunging them back inside her.

"Oh god, yes...Paige...I'm so close," Madison moaned, her hips moving in rhythm with Paige's hand, as she held on tightly to Paige's shoulders. Paige lifted her head and looked at her face, needing to see her.

Madison felt the movement and opened her eyes.

"I love you," she breathed, her eyes locking with Paige's.

"I love you," Paige said softly, stroking her fingers into Madison, adding a third finger as she felt her get wetter and open up inside.

Madison moaned loudly, her eyes closing as Paige's fingers moved back up over her clit again, then thrusting inside her, filling her once again. Madison's entire body tensed up, and Paige pressed her thumb on Madison's clit as she cried out, her hips jerking against Paige's thumb as she clamped down on her fingers hard, holding her fingers there inside her.

At last, Madison's body slumped down, as she gasped for breath and Paige felt the tremors and spasms continue as she stroked gently in and out of her, the wetness covering her hand now. She pressed down lightly on her clit, testing, and smiled when she heard a sharp gasp and felt her shudder.

Slowly, reluctantly, Paige withdrew her fingers from Madison, kissing her softly on the lips.

Madison's arms wrapped around her neck and held her to her, her entire body relaxed and languid.

"You feel so good," Paige said, softly. Madison felt the hand still resting between her legs press down gently.

"*You* feel so good," Madison breathed, smiling up at her. She couldn't really speak yet.

Paige lowered her head, resting on Madison's shoulder. She felt Madison's heart hammering loudly against her chest.

"Are you alright?" Madison asked gently, stroking her back and shoulders.

"Yes," Paige said, "Very alright," she added, smiling into her neck.

"Are you tortured?" Madison asked.

"Yes," Paige repeated.

"I want you so much," Madison whispered, her voice raw with need.

"I want you too." Paige said. She lifted her head up.

"I am completely satisfied for now," she said, looking into her eyes earnestly. "Believe me, I want you to touch me. I will be begging you to touch me."

"You don't need to beg, all you have to do is ask," Madison said.

"I know," Paige said. "Just let me hold you," she said, pulling Madison closer.

"Yes," Madison murmured, kissing Paige's hair softly.

After a very late breakfast and showers, they decided to go into town and do a little sight seeing and shopping. Paige was downright giddy and every time she glanced at Madison got a huge grin on her face.

"Would you stop grinning like that, everyone here will know what we've been up to," Madison whispered through clenched teeth.

"Sorry, can't," Paige said, apologetically, the grin growing wider. Madison blushed and laughed, shaking her head. The town was small and the shops were quaint and full of antiques shops and unique odds and ends. Even the grocery store was small and felt more like an old-fashioned general store than anything, but Paige found what she was looking for and they stocked up on some necessities. Madison picked out a bottle of red wine and Paige picked out almost everything else.

When they returned to the bungalow, it was late in the afternoon.

"What are you going to do to amuse yourself while I cook?" Paige asked Madison, setting ingredients out on the counter.

"Sit here and watch you," Madison replied, with a cheeky grin, as she opened the bottle of wine

and poured a glass.

Paige laughed. "No, didn't I already tell you? There is no watching. You either chop onions and mushrooms again or you have to leave."

"Oh, I'll chop then," Madison said, grabbing the bag from the counter. "I don't want to leave."

Paige smiled up at her. "Good. I don't want you to either," she said.

They worked and talked together in the small kitchen, not as nice to cook in as Madison's but still workable. Paige sautéed the onions and mushrooms in some butter and then added some spices, then cubes of chicken, and a strong exotic scent rose immediately to Madison's nose.

"What are you making?" she demanded, peering into the skillet.

"Chicken curry. Would you mind handing me the rice?" she asked.

"Yes, my sweet girl, I will get you the rice," she said, seeing the blush rise up on Paige's face at being called her sweet girl. Oh, but she was, so very sweet. She leaned in to kiss Paige on the lips. "That smells so fantastic," she added.

Paige mixed sour cream and milk into the chicken, now browned, and covered the skillet, turning down the heat.

"There. I just need to let that simmer for about a half an hour and then we can eat," she said.

"Come with me then," Madison said, taking her by the hand. She brought the glass of wine she had poured earlier with her.

They went outside on the deck and Madison climbed into the hammock, setting the wine on a table next to it.

"Come here," she said. Paige looked doubtful.

"Will it hold us both?" she asked.

"Only one way to find out," Madison said, smirking.

"Ok, but if we fall on our asses I blame you," Paige said. She climbed gingerly into the hammock, and lay back next to Madison. The hammock swayed gently, but didn't collapse.

"There, see? Isn't this nice?" murmured Madison, kissing her cheek softly.

Paige sighed, snuggling closer into her arms. "Yes, it is," she agreed.

Madison smiled. "Ok now, I want you to relax. You're going to like this, I promise." She reached

for the glass of wine and took a sip, carefully setting it back down. She dipped her head down to kiss Paige, who responded willingly though clueless. She felt Madison's tongue part her lips and opened them, and felt a trickle of liquid enter her mouth. Catching on quickly she sucked from Madison's lips, hungrily, draining the wine from her mouth. It was warm and sweet and...intoxicating. Madison pulled away, licking her lips and smiling.

Paige opened her eyes and Madison saw the hunger there just beneath the surface.

"Do you want more?" she asked, suggestively. Paige nodded eagerly. Madison took another sip of wine and lowered her mouth to Paige's, letting it slowly trickle into her mouth as Paige strained to drink from her. This time she didn't pull away after, but let Paige swallow before pressing her tongue inside her mouth, tasting the wine and Paige's own sweet taste combined. She moaned softly as Paige sucked on her tongue, eagerly exploring her mouth and lips.

"More," Paige asked, as they parted at last. Madison gladly obliged, letting her drink her fill from her lips until they were both dizzy with the effects of the wine and the hungry kisses, Madison not so much from the wine as she hadn't swallowed much of it herself.

"We'd better check on the food," Madison reminded her at last.

"Oh shit!" Paige exclaimed. "I forgot about it." She climbed out of the hammock and ran into the kitchen.

Luckily, everything had been on low heat and was ok. She was serving their food as Madison came back inside, her lips stained red from the wine. Paige walked over to her and kissed her lips again, sucking her bottom lip and tasting the last traces of wine there.

"I could be happy just having you for dinner," Paige whispered.

Madison chuckled. "You had me for breakfast. And you need to eat something real or you're going to pass out if I give you any more wine," she said, scolding gently.

"Yes Doc," Paige said, brattily, and Madison sighed and shook her head.

They ate at the table and Madison moaned her approval of the food, almost causing Paige to make good on her threat of having her for dinner, but Madison stubbornly insisted on eating first. At last, they were both full and decided to take a walk on the beach again. It was close to sunset and the ocean breeze was cold, so Madison bundled herself and Paige up in fleece sweatshirts before they left the cottage.

They strolled slowly hand in hand, and when the orange sun reached the horizon out on the water, they sat down on the sand and watched it set, Paige tucking Madison's hand into her sweatshirt pocket with hers.

They were silent and watched as the stars slowly began to appear in the twilight sky.

"What are you thinking about?" Paige asked, finally, glancing over at Madison.

"I was thinking about this morning," Madison confessed, grinning sheepishly. Paige smiled and bit her lip.

"What about it?" Paige asked.

"Just how surprising it was, the way my body reacts and feels with you," she said. "Not that I had any doubts," she went on quickly. "But I've never been with...a woman before."

"How did I compare?" Paige asked, hoping she didn't sound insecure.

"There is no comparison, Paige," Madison said. "I have never felt anything like what I feel with you, ever, in my life. It's like...when you are a child and you think your world is so huge, your family, your home, your school. And then you grow up and realize how tiny your little world really is compared to the entire earth, or the universe...that's how I feel when I compare anything I thought of before as love or pleasure or desire, to you..." she gulped. "It was nothing, it wasn't even a drop in the bucket compared to how you make me feel," she admitted.

Paige was speechless for a few moments. "So it was ok, then," she said at last, smiling, and Madison swatted her softly on the arm.

"Kidding," Paige said, dipping her head to kiss her.

"I've never felt this way before either," she confessed. "I always thought the best part of anything was you know, the end goal, having an orgasm...that was all I really cared about, before," she said, slowly. "But with you, all I want to do is touch you, make you feel good...and not just get to that point-although that was really, really nice," she grinned. "But I could spend hours just kissing you, tasting and feeling your skin, hearing the sounds you make and loving every inch of you and be completely happy," she said.

Madison squeezed her hand inside her pocket. "That is a really good thing, because I love it when you touch me, in any way...and I hope you know how much I love touching you too."

"I do," Paige whispered. "I love that too," she added. "Are you afraid?" Paige asked. It was an unspoken fear but she knew they both knew what she meant.

"Yes," Madison said, honestly. She glanced up at Paige. "I am...but I want you so much more than I am afraid," she said.

"You're not allowed to be afraid," Paige objected, teasingly.

"Are *you* afraid?" Madison asked her, gently.

"No," Paige said after a long pause. "I'm not afraid of you ever, Madison. I need your touch, want it so much. I'm only scared of...myself, my mind, my body," she said, quietly.

"I know," Madison said, reaching up with her free hand to brush the hair out of Paige's eyes. "But I will be right here, and you can stop anytime. Don't ever feel bad or that it's too late to turn back Paige. I will wait for you forever," she vowed. "I love you."

Paige lowered her head and rested it on Madison's shoulder, allowing herself to be embraced by her words. "Thank you."

When Madison came out of the bathroom after getting ready for bed, she saw that Paige had lit several candles in the bedroom, all the other lights turned off. She was standing by the bed, and as she turned to look at her, her blue eyes stood out against the candlelight looking almost translucent. They both moved toward one another, meeting in the middle of the room, and Paige put her arms around Madison's neck and leaned in to kiss her softly.

As she moved away, she brought her hand up to Madison's pajama top and slowly started undoing the top button, her eyes gazing upward to see if Madison had any objections. All she found was a smile and warm encouraging eyes staring back at her, so she continued until they were all undone and Madison shrugged the shirt off her shoulders and let it slip off her arms. Paige ran her hands down Madison's bare arms and let her gaze wander to her breasts, drinking the sight in hungrily. She moved closer and tugged playfully at the waistband of Madison's pajama bottoms. She bent down, pushing them down over her hips and letting them slide to the floor, as Madison kicked them off her feet. Paige kissed her tummy and stood back up.

"Would you undress me, please?" she whispered, her eyes large and trusting. Madison knew that this was her gift to her, allowing her to be the one to undress her, to see her naked and vulnerable. Showing her the trust she had in her. Madison felt her heart pound faster as she looked into Paige's face.

Seeing nothing but love and trust in her eyes, she slowly lifted Paige's pajama top off over her head, letting it fall to the floor. She gazed at her for a long moment, and then hooked her fingers under the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Madison pulled them down and pushed them to her ankles, helping her step out of them.

Madison allowed herself to take the sight in, her breath catching. She was gorgeous, perfect. Paige pushed her back towards the bed slowly, until Madison fell back softly on the bed.

"You are breathtaking," Madison breathed, looking up at her, her eyes filled with desire.

Paige stood there, her heart hammering painfully in her chest.

"Lay back," Paige asked, softly. Madison lay down on the bed, on top of the covers, completely

naked and exposed, but she smiled up at Paige reassuringly. Paige swallowed hard and reached out to stroke the soft skin on her stomach. She lay down beside her on the bed, on her side, propping her head up on one elbow, and let her hand continue to roam over all the newly exposed skin, glowing pink in the candle light.

As Paige let her fingers explore, she leaned down and kissed her collarbone, then her chest, and then a nipple, lightly. Her fingers skimmed over smooth skin until they felt something, a slight bump, and she looked over at where her fingers were.

She peered closer at Madison's stomach and saw a white scar, slightly raised. She examined it closer, and saw several more nearby, some of them criss-crossed. Confusion turned to fear as she looked over her lover's skin, examining it for more scars, finding several more, and she looked at Madison with a concerned look on her face.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

Madison closed her eyes, and opened them again, sighing.

"Come up here, please," she said, softly.

Paige scooted up, keeping her hand over the scars she had just been looking at.

"Who did that to you?" Paige asked, insistently.

"I did that to me."

Paige seemed to absorb this information slowly, shaking her head.

"You did? By accident?"

"No sweetie, I cut myself there, and other places. My thighs, my upper arms," she added, her voice quiet. "A long time ago," she added, as if to soften the blow.

"You...cut yourself?" Paige seemed unable to comprehend it, shaking her head. Madison nodded, feeling all her defenses and walls crumble down. She had never felt so...exposed before, in her life. But she didn't want to hide anything from Paige.

Why?" Paige asked finally, her eyes filled with pain.

"A lot of reasons...well...some of them you understand," Madison reminded her gently. She wrestled with what to say, what not to say. She hadn't wanted tonight to go like this but she knew it was just a matter of time before Paige saw her, and asked. She just hoped that it wouldn't shatter Paige's image of her as the strong, competent doctor and woman she tried to be.

"Tell me," Paige asked, pleadingly. "Please." She reached over and pulled the coverlet on the bed over them, covering Madison up lovingly. She kept her hand on her stomach and rubbed the skin

in soft circles.

"I told you my mother died when I was young," Madison said. "I was eight, and when I lost her...I lost the only good thing in my life at that time. My father was an alcoholic... an abusive one." She said, feeling Paige tense up beside her.

"He...wasn't a good man. He never hugged me or said he loved me unless he was drunk. He...he always made me feel like I was worthless. Always found things to criticize. And if I crossed him the wrong way at the wrong moment he would hit me or lash out at me any way he could, throw anything he could reach at me. And of course, moving all the time, I never had a network of support anywhere else. Not at school, not friends, not family. No siblings. No one." Madison said.

"He stopped hitting me when I got older, but he never stopped the verbal abuse. I think that's when I started cutting, it was easier to deal with that than the emotional pain and isolation. When I realized that my only way out was college, I threw myself into school and got a full scholarship. When I got there, I went to a school counselor...and I eventually got help and stopped cutting. And...well, now you know what led me to the career I chose," she said, smiling softly.

Paige had been listening raptly. Her thoughts and emotions were a jumbled mess.

"You really did know...when you said you knew how I felt," she whispered, the realization and implications dawning on her. So many things were beginning to make sense.

"Yes, my love" Madison said. "I understood a lot of things, Paige." She kissed her forehead lovingly.

"How could anybody hurt you?" Paige said, her eyes brimming with unshed tears now.

"I asked myself the same question about you," Madison pointed out.

"Yes but he was your father! He was your only parent...how can anybody be that selfish and...horrible?" Paige raged. "That bastard!"

"Sometimes people do the best they can with what they know," Madison said, quietly.

"No! Don't give me that counselor bullshit," Paige said, sitting up, feeling her anger surge towards this unknown man. "There's no excuse for that! None! You were just...little...and he was supposed to take care of you!" Paige cried. Madison reached up and touched her face, softly.

Paige came back down and buried her face in Madison's hair. "I'm sorry," Paige whispered, crying softly. "I just...I hate thinking of anything hurting you. It hurts me so much."

Madison felt her own tears stinging her eyes. She hadn't cried over this, over herself, in so many years.

"It's alright," she said. "I love that you are angry for me, angry at him. But you can't do anything about it, it's over with," she soothed.

"He's still alive! I could go hunt him down," Paige said, fiercely. Madison smiled affectionately.

"No you won't. He's not worth it, my love. He is just a lonely old man now, and he can't hurt me anymore. Besides, I need you here with me," Madison said, holding her close.

"It's not fair," Paige protested, "I can't stand the thought of anyone hurting you. Of you hurting so much inside that you needed to hurt yourself."

"I know," Madison said. "Believe me, I know how you feel." She ran her fingers over Paige's cheek, and brushed them over her lips, remembering how swollen and bruised she looked that night so long ago. Paige raised her head up.

"I guess you do, huh?" she asked. Madison nodded.

Paige stroked her hair, wiping away the tears streaking down her face.

"I'm sorry you had to hurt for me too." She leaned down, kissing Madison's face all over, softly.

"I'm sorry he hurt you and made you feel that way. I'm going to spend every day of my life loving you and trying to make up for it," she murmured into Madison's ear. "Show you how amazingly beautiful and wonderful you are," she continued, kissing her lips softly. "I'm going to return all the love and strength that you gave me and pour it back into you, and love you the way you deserve to be loved. I'm going to cherish you every moment, take care of you..." she trailed off, overcome with her desire to make everything better, to show her how much she loved her.

Madison kissed her cheek.

"But you already do, Paige...you've given me back so much, and your love is all I need, all I want. Just...love me."

"I do, I love you so much," Paige whispered fiercely, kissing her on the lips hard, with raw hurt, rage, love and desire all mixed up. Madison responded urgently, pulling Paige down on top of her in her enthusiasm. Paige broke away after several long kisses. She threw the blanket off them and lay herself down on top of Madison, their bare skin touching, and Paige moaned at the sensation of it.

"This feels so good," Madison murmured.

"God yes...it does," Paige agreed, sighing. She ran her fingers through Madison's messy blonde hair and smiled. "You are *so* beautiful," she whispered.

Madison looked into her eyes and saw such love and honesty, she had to believe it.

Paige kissed her, gently this time, the kisses slow and loving, tender. The gentle kisses grew more insistent as they stoked the fire that had been burning like embers inside them all day.

Paige pressed one of her legs between Madison's, straddling her thigh and pushing her thigh up against Madison's center. Madison whimpered into her mouth at the contact, both at the pressure against her throbbing core and the feel of Paige's heat on her thigh.

Paige pulled away from their kiss and raised her head, exposing her neck. Madison kissed her there, all down her throat and neck, paying special attention to the scar, which she kissed gently. As she sucked and kissed at tender skin and bit gently, Paige ground herself down harder against Madison's thigh. Madison gasped as she felt the wetness, the slick hot skin grinding onto her.

"You feel so...wet...so good," she moaned, distracted from anything else.

"Please, touch me," Paige pleaded, grabbing Madison's hand and drawing it down between them, urging her where she needed her.

Madison slid her hand down further, between Paige's legs, her palm up, her fingers seeking. Paige lowered herself back down onto Madison's hand, feeling her fingers touch her, move against her.

Madison moaned as she touched her for the first time. It was...so incredible. She was so wet, for her. All for her.

"Oh god," Paige moaned loudly. "Madison," she breathed, and ground her hips down again, Madison holding her hand still and letting Paige use her, moving to where her fingers felt best. Madison felt incredible warmth and wetness coating her hand, Paige moving her hips until her clit was grinding down on Madison's fingers.

"Yes, that's it, sweetie," Madison murmured, as she slowly began moving her fingers over her, just stroking back and forth over the small bundle of nerves, encouraged by Paige's sharp gasps and moans.

"Please don't stop," Paige cried out, desperately.

"Oh baby I won't," Madison whispered. "I will never stop unless you want me to," she assured her.

"Don't stop," Paige repeated, and Madison smiled and brought her lips up to kiss Paige, as her fingers continued to move between them.

Paige felt blinding pleasure, it was nothing like touching herself, she realized. It was nothing like she had ever felt, and it felt so good. There was no fear, no hesitation, she wanted Madison right here, just like this...

"Oh god," Paige murmured, trembling hard all over. "Oh please...yes...Madison," she cried, her voice breaking.

"Are you going to come for me, Paige?" Madison whispered, her voice low and rough.

"God, yes!" Paige cried out loudly, her back arching as her hips thrust down one final time, and Madison could feel her spasm on her fingers, and felt wetness coat her hand. Paige's breaths came short and fast as she climaxed. She finally collapsed, laying her weight on top of Madison, gasping for breath.

Madison slowly pulled her hand out from under them and wrapped her arms around her, holding her tight. She peppered her face with soft kisses.

"I love you...I love you so much," Madison said, holding her tighter. Paige buried her face in her neck, and Madison simply held her, rocking her gently. Her hand went up to Paige's silky dark hair and stroked it softly.

"I love you," Paige whispered, when she found her voice again.

"That was so beautiful, so special to me, Paige," Madison said, pressing a kiss to her hair.

"I want to give you all of me," Paige responded. "Everything I am, everything I have, belongs to you," she said. Madison kissed her lips gently.

"My heart has belonged to you for a very long time. I will never try to hold anything back from you again." Madison promised. "You are so beautiful when you love me and when you let me love you, not just your body but your soul. I can feel you inside me when we touch. And it is so...incredible," Madison murmured, kissing Paige again.

"Are you tormented?" Paige asked her, pulling away for a breath.

"With you lying naked in my arms? Always. But no, I...I actually came when you did, you were pressed against me and it was so incredible feeling you, hearing you...I don't need anything else but to hold you." Madison said, feeling herself blush in the dark.

Paige grinned. "You um...really liked it then?"

Madison growled softly in her ear and kissed her neck, dissolving any doubts Paige may have had.

They lay like that for a long time, Madison holding her and loving her, Paige letting her love and comforting touches heal her, like balm to her wounds that still lurked beneath the surface. She felt whole, and complete. Madison eventually got up to blow out the candles and covered them both up, feeling Paige cling to her again as soon as she lay back down. They slept naked, wrapped in each others arms, and the moon outside seemed to smile down on them both.

The next day dawned grey and rainy, something not unheard of in the Northwest. Madison awoke and after stretching and moving around, opened her eyes, glancing around for Paige. She wasn't in bed, she noted with a frown. Then she worried...where was she? Maybe she'd had a bad dream. Madison stumbled out of bed and grabbed her pink silk pajama top on, buttoning it up partway as she shuffled into the living room and then rounding the corner into the kitchen.

Paige glanced up from the stove to see Madison appear at the doorway of the kitchen, hair tousled and half-naked. She smiled brightly.

"Good morning sleepy head! "

"I just woke up and you weren't there and...I was worried...I thought maybe you had a nightmare or something," Madison said, as Paige came up to her and kissed her, pulling her into the kitchen and bringing her close to her, wrapping her arms around her waist.

"Now doctor, you should know that if I had a bad dream, the first place I would want to be is in bed with you..." Paige pointed out. Madison smiled.

"I guess you do have a point," she admitted sheepishly.

"I um...I'm going to go get dressed," she said, squirming against Paige self-consciously.

"Aw...c'mon...I like you this way," Paige pleaded, grinning down at her and running her hands down her back and over her soft bare bottom.

Madison smiled shyly. She sniffed the air.

"Bacon?"

"Uh huh...but...I don't know. Bacon is quickly losing its appeal," Paige said in a soft, sensual voice. "I'd really rather come back to bed with you," she said, wistfully, her fingers stroking the soft skin they were lingering on.

Madison smiled at her and shook her head. "I love bacon. And I'm hungry! Let me go get dressed and I'll come right back and eat."

Paige trailed her fingers up under Madison's shirt, stroking her sides, making her squirm. Paige took a deep breath as if trying to control herself.

"Tell you what. We'll compromise. You go get back into bed, and stay naked. I'll bring you breakfast in bed, we'll eat and then I'll get naked too and get back into bed with you." she suggested.

Madison laughed. "Breakfast in bed? What's a girl to do? Ok...but hurry. I miss you." she said, and Paige kissed her soundly before letting her go, watching her tug at the hem of her shirt, trying to cover herself as she left.

As soon as she rounded the corner Paige went to the doorway and peeked, watching her go, the soft rounded curves of her bottom just barely showing beneath the hem of her nightshirt. Madison turned around at the bedroom door and saw Paige watching. She grinned and shooed her away with her hands.

Ten minutes later Paige came into the bedroom carrying a breakfast tray with bacon, scrambled eggs and toast, along with coffee and Orange juice.

She set the tray down and leaned down to kiss Madison, who was sitting up in bed with the sheet pulled up to her chest. Paige grinned as she noticed that Madison's top was off and she was naked under the blankets.

"You are very, very bad," Madison scolded her, looking at her reproachfully, her face still tinged pink.

"You like that about me," Paige replied, smugly. Madison rolled her eyes, not denying it because she knew that it was true.

Paige set the tray over her lap and walked over to the other side of the bed. She was about to climb in when Madison stopped her.

"Hey now! You said you'd get naked too."

"I said I would after breakfast."

"Why do I have to eat breakfast naked but you don't?" Madison asked, trying to keep a straight face.

"Because...I'm the cook?" Paige asked, hopefully. Madison smiled.

"No."

"I might spill jelly on myself," Paige argued.

"I'll lick it off." Madison shot back. Paige looked at her for a moment and then shrugged, peeled her tank top off, and dropped her boxers to the floor in record time. She climbed into bed, pulling the covers over her. Madison laughed, pleasantly shocked. She kissed Paige and then handed her a plate of food. They ate breakfast, both hungrier than they had originally thought.

"You make really good bacon," Madison said. "Not too limp and not burnt."

"Thank you," Paige said, trying in vain to jiggle her toast so that the jelly would fall off, but she had spread it on too thinly. Madison looked over at her, and laughed again.

"You don't need jelly on you for me to lick you," she said, a serious on her face. Paige swallowed hard, and set her toast down. She watched as Madison continued eating, having lost her appetite for breakfast suddenly.

"It's rainy today," Madison observed, looking out the window, seeming oblivious to Paige's torment.

Paige ran her finger over Madison's bare shoulder. "Do you really want to leave the house today?" she asked, softly. Madison caught her eyes and saw the need and desire there in the blue depths. Her stomach plunged violently.

"No," she answered. "Not really."

"Hurry up with your breakfast," Paige said, smiling and taking a sip of Madison's orange juice.

"I'm done," Madison said, losing interest in food quickly as well.

Paige set the tray down on the floor beside the bed. She crawled over to Madison's side of the bed then, kissing her way up her arm and shoulder, then her collarbone and throat, until at last she reached her lips.

Madison kissed her back, weaving her fingers through Paige's hair and pulling her closer. Paige's hand roamed beneath the blankets, stroking soft warm skin wherever it could find it, across a hip, over her tummy, between her breasts.

"I want to make love to you," she whispered. She didn't wait for a response, but pressed a soft kiss on Madison's forehead, then each eyelid, her nose, cheeks, mouth, chin. Every kiss was slow and tender, and she continued to kiss her way down, not hurrying but savoring each spot she pressed her lips to.

She made her way down Madison's throat, pausing occasionally to lap with her tongue or suck gently. She kissed her way down her shoulder, discovering several small faint white scars on her upper arm and kissing each one lovingly.

Paige trailed her lips down her arm and kissed the top of her hand, turning it over in her hand and kissing the palm. She kissed each fingertip and thumb, and then slid Madison's first and second finger into her mouth, sucking on them gently and moving her mouth up and down over them suggestively. Madison looked down at her, and whimpered softly, never dreaming that someone sucking on her fingers could make her ache and throb so badly.

Paige withdrew the fingers from her mouth, smiling up at her. She resumed worshipping Madison's body, kissing her chest and working her way down to her breasts, covering each one with kisses. She ignored her nipples completely, sucking the soft skin of her outer breast into her

mouth and tracing wet circles with her tongue around her areola, watching in delight as Madison's nipples grew even harder, straining for a touch from her.

Paige moved closer, breathing warm puffs of air over a nipple, and then finally placed a feather light kiss on the tip of it. She did the same to the other, and Madison was truly squirming now, still partially sitting upright against the pillows. Paige put an arm around her waist and tugged her down lower so she was lying flat on the bed.

Paige began a slow, torturous exploration of her tummy, finding each scar and lavishing special attention to them, with kisses and gentle sucks, dipping her tongue inside Madison's belly button and swirling it there. She kissed down her lower abdomen, loving the silky soft skin and gently rounded curves, kissing a hipbone and moving down her thigh, alternating kisses and softly sucking the skin into her mouth. She scooted down the bed, kissing all the way down to her toes, and glanced up, a wicked grin on her face.

"Paige," Madison protested, feebly, but simply whimpered as Paige teased her toes with the tip of her tongue, flicking between each toe and then covering her big toe with her mouth, sucking and running her tongue over and around it, until Madison moaned.

It was insane how incredible it felt, Madison could not believe that having her toe sucked could be such a turn on. Then again, everything Paige did to her felt amazing.

Paige continued kissing her way up her foot, her calf.

At this point Paige moved between Madison's legs, pushing them apart until she was kneeling between them. Madison offered no resistance, and Paige smiled and kissed her way slowly up her knee, and then her thigh.

Paige breathed her in deeply, her face inches away from the honey colored curls that beckoned her.

Paige nudged her thighs further apart, and kissed the crease where her thigh ended, and Madison gasped softly.

"Paige," she whispered, lifting her head up to look down at her. Paige lifted her head up and looked up at her, inquisitively.

"What are you...I mean...you don't have to do that," Madison stammered, realizing that she stupidly hadn't realized where this was leading the entire time. She had thought about it before, had dreamed of Paige's mouth down there, but she had never had a pleasant experience when it came to oral sex before. Most of her boyfriends either hadn't wanted to do it or were so rough down there that it hurt.

"Please," Paige said, gazing up at her. "I want to taste you. I *need* to taste you," she begged.

"Yes!" Madison said, hearing and seeing the desire and need in Paige, which was more than

enough reason for her to give in, throbbing painfully at the words.

Madison laid her head back and felt warm breath on her, between her legs, felt a soft kiss pressed to her mound before she felt delicate fingers parting her curls, spreading her open. She squirmed in anticipation, nervous of the intimate scrutiny, but she forgot all of this as she felt Paige's tongue flicker out and brush against her, above her clit. Paige traced her inner lips with her tongue, running up one side and down the other, the tip exploring each crease and fold, and then dipping down lower at her entrance, tasting her fully.

She heard and felt the vibrations as Paige moaned, pressing her tongue deeper inside her, and Madison gasped as the warm, wet tongue penetrated her.

She was writhing on the bed now, her hands clutching at the sheets. After several more deep plunges inside her, Paige withdrew, and still using her fingers to hold Madison open, ran her tongue back up, circling her clit softly, all around it, flicking the tip of her tongue against it but never using any pressure there.

Madison whimpered, realizing this familiar pattern from the teasing kisses Paige had given her that night at her house in front of the fire. She was going to tease her, torment her. Madison's hips strained up at the light teasing touches, seeking firmer contact, but Paige pulled away.

"You taste so good," she whispered up at her, smiling, and all Madison was capable of was a loud groan. Paige dipped her head back down and began to lick in earnest all around her aching clit, avoiding it completely, until the whimpers from above turned to soft cries and pleadings.

"Paige, please," Madison pleaded, and Paige glanced up once more just to see her face. It was beautiful, an expression of need and agony etched across it, her eyes closed tightly, her hands twisted in the sheets.

Paige breathed deeply and lowered her mouth, closing her lips around the exposed clit and sucking firmly, keeping her where she wanted her, her mouth locked on its prize.

Madison gasped loudly. "Oh fuck! Paige...what are you doing?" she moaned, feeling the soft tongue lap at her while sucking on it at the same time. She had never felt anything like it in her whole life, this was nothing like...anything anyone had ever done to her. The sensations washing over her were almost too intense to bear.

Paige moved one of her hands down, her fingertips exploring wetness and warmth, seeking the entrance her tongue had explored only moments before.

Madison felt the fingertips teasing, circling, and swirling in the slick wetness coming from her.

"Oh, please," she moaned, unable to verbalize her needs coherently, but Paige knew, understood, and slid her fingers inside, three all at once, as deep as she could go.

Madison called out her name, and Paige withdrew her fingers to the tips, thrusting them back

inside, her mouth sucking on her sensitive clit relentlessly.

Madison moaned helplessly, feeling filled so completely, that warm mouth still covering her, as Paige's touches drove her higher and higher with every stroke, every lick.

Paige pumped her fingers inside Madison, curling them upwards, and changed her suctioning motion to lapping with the flat of her tongue and rubbing her bottom lip against Madison's swollen clit, which produced a low guttural moan from above.

Madison cried out, feeling the orgasm crest suddenly, violently ripping through her, her back arching off the bed to keep in contact with Paige's tongue. She clamped down around Paige's fingers buried deep inside her, with a gush of wetness as wave after wave of pleasure rocked through her body.

Paige suckled softly on her clit, milking every spasm from her, until she cried out, suddenly feeling as though she would scream if Paige touched her clit anymore. Paige released it, gently, and placed a soft kiss on it, making Madison shiver.

Paige moved her body back up on top of her, bringing her mouth to cover hers in a wet, deep kiss. Madison moaned again as she tasted herself on her lips and tongue, finding it strangely erotic and sensual. She sucked Paige's tongue into her mouth, remembering where it had just been and feeling a spasm jolt through her again at the thought.

Paige pulled back from the kiss, smiling.

"I felt that," she said, wriggling her fingers inside her. Madison simply whimpered.

"Are you ok? Did I hurt you?" Paige asked.

"No...god no," Madison breathed. "Can't...talk," she whispered, feeling overwhelmed, her eyes still closed tightly. She felt like sobbing and laughing all at once.

"I love you," Paige said, kissing her damp forehead.

Paige began to withdraw her fingers from Madison, but she whimpered at the loss and reached down, stopping her hand. Paige stopped moving and pressed back inside, not eager to leave the warm cocoon her fingers were wrapped in.

"I can stay" she said, softly.

"Yes, please," Madison urged. "You feel so good inside me."

"You are so gorgeous when you are being tormented," Paige whispered, leaning in to kiss her lips softly.

"You...are cruel," Madison said, her eyes flickering open at last. Paige was smiling down at her,

her vivid blue eyes the first thing she saw.

"Hi there," Paige said, still smiling.

"Hi," Madison murmured, smiling back. "My god, you are amazing with that mouth. Who would have known? It looks so sweet and innocent," she marveled. Paige laughed, looking pleased.

"It's all part of my grand doctor seduction plan," Paige said, nuzzling her nose with hers.

"I see," Madison said. "You are never going to let me live the whole "being your Doctor" thing down, are you...even when we're 70."

"I'll be 61," Paige pointed out, grinning as Madison glared at her in indignation.

"And no, I won't. But it's only because I love teasing you. I don't love you because you were my doctor. I love you...despite it, and regardless of it." Paige said, looking serious. "I love you because you are...you. You're Madison. And you are the most amazing, kind, loving person I have ever known. Not to mention the most beautiful...and sexy woman I have ever known."

"I know, sweetheart," Madison said, smiling. "I really do. I'm just so damned happy I don't care about anything else anymore," she smiled.

"Good. Because I need you," Paige whispered, kissing her hungrily. "And I want you," she added, kissing her again, sucking her bottom lip into her mouth gently.

"God, you're insatiable," Madison groaned. Paige flexed her fingers still buried inside her.

"I can't help it. You are so god damned sexy I can't get enough," Paige breathed, as she curled them upward again, stroked softly out, and back in.

Madison began to object, but Paige stroked inside her again, this time letting her thumb brush lightly against her clit. Madison's body responded, helplessly, clenching down on her fingers, her clit recovered enough that it felt good again. Too good.

Paige expected her to push her hand away, but Madison reached down, covered Paige's hand with hers and pushed Paige inside her, deeper.

Paige responded by pressing harder on her clit as she thrust inside her again.

"God...I can't believe I want more," Madison groaned, never before having felt anything like the constant burning desire she felt for Paige.

"I want more too," Paige purred in her ear. "I want to stay right here and watch your face as you come," she went on, her fingers thrusting harder inside her.

"Oh god...Paige," Madison murmured, suddenly turned on more than she ever had been in her

entire life.

Her hips began to thrust upward, meeting every stroke of Paige's fingers.

Paige was overcome with lust and desire, and bit her lip, breathing hard as she plunged her hand repeatedly into Madison.

"Harder," Madison begged, and Paige gladly obeyed, using her entire arm to thrust her fingers into her, moving faster and pressing into her deeper with every stroke, her thumb rubbing against her clit with every movement.

"God yes!" Madison cried, loudly, and closed her eyes.

"I want to see your beautiful face when you go over that edge into the abyss." Paige said, urging her on.

Her fingers were thrusting in and out, faster and harder, and the sensations on top of hearing those words pushed Madison over the edge, her body feeling like it was shattering, as she cried out for Paige, feeling the orgasm explode deep down inside her.

She clung to Paige, pulling her closer, holding on desperately as her body clenched and shook with the intensity of her orgasm. At last, Madison sank back into the bed, panting hard, a sheen of sweat covering her.

Paige bent down and kissed her, whispering sweet words in her ear, her fingers still trapped inside Madison as she pulsed around them.

"God, you are so incredibly beautiful when you come," she whispered in Madison's ear. "I have dreamed about seeing your face like that, hearing you call out for me, and it's more beautiful than I ever could have imagined," she said, nuzzling her face against hers.

"I love you," Madison murmured.

"I love you too," Paige said, her heart banging in her chest from her exertions as well as her emotions. She kissed Madison's cheek softly, and lay down on top of her, exhausted.

"Nobody has ever...ever touched me, made love to me that way," Madison whispered, stroking Paige's hair as she lay on top of her.

"Then they didn't know what they were missing," Paige whispered, her fingers twitching deep inside of Madison.

"Don't even think about it," Madison laughed softly. "You can come out now," she said, reluctantly.

Paige slowly withdrew her fingers, slowly. As she finally slid out, she heard Madison gasp

softly, feeling the loss of them, the emptiness. Paige quickly kissed her deeply, trying to make up for it.

"I can still feel you there inside of me," Madison murmured as they broke away from their kiss. "I've never felt anything like this before."

She looked up at Paige.

"I want to taste you," she whispered, her eyes pleading. Paige smiled softly.

"Can I admit how happy I am that I am the first woman you've ever been with?" Paige grinned.

"You're the only one, Paige...the only one I want," Madison admitted, swallowing hard.

Paige looked at her, her eyes sparking with desire and need. She moved her hand down between her legs and brought it back up, her fingers glistening wet. She brought them up to Madison's lips, and ran a wet fingertip over her bottom lip. Madison's pink tongue darted out, licking. She glanced up at Paige, pleading silently.

Paige pressed her fingers against Madison's lips, and Madison opened them, taking Paige's fingers eagerly into her mouth and sucking, hungrily, moaning softly.

Paige moaned and squirmed on top of her, Madison's tongue lapping at her fingers and sucking them clean. The noises she was making were driving Paige crazy.

"Do you like it?" she finally asked, her voice raw with need. Madison finally let her fingers slide from her lips, licking her lips.

"Yes...I like it...I want more...please..." Madison was so overcome with desire to feel her, taste her. She struggled with herself, holding back, not wanting to push.

Paige rolled over onto her back, bringing Madison with her so that she was now lying on top of her.

Madison smiled at the unexpected roll.

"Please, touch me, I need you," Paige pleaded, her eyes dark with desire.

Madison took a deep breath and reverently kissed her, acknowledging silently how precious those words were to her. She moved down Paige's body, kissing her breasts, taking a firm nipple into her mouth, sucking.

"Later, please," Paige begged, pushing her away gently and urging her down further.

Madison, overcome with Paige's own desperate need, quickly moved down between her legs as Paige spread them open for her, encouraging her.

Madison paused for a heartbeat, a million thoughts bombarding her at once. She had never done this, what if she didn't do it right, what if it didn't feel good to Paige...and oh god, she was so trusting, so open, it was overwhelming, and she felt tears prick her eyes.

But overriding all of these thoughts was her own desire to feel and taste her, love her, pleasure her, and she placed a soft kiss on her inner thigh, placing her hand on her stomach and stroking her softly, whether to comfort and assure Paige or herself she wasn't sure. She saw the thick patch of black curls before her eyes, the pink, wet, glistening folds hidden beneath, and she used her tongue to push past them, licking up the whole length of her sex, her tongue gathering and tasting the abundant wetness there.

She heard Paige gasp softly above her, and she repeated the motion, running the length of her tongue up and down, using her free hand to part the curls more fully and give her better access. She tasted and swallowed, reveling in the sweetness of Paige, lapping again at her, wanting more. She was amazed at how much she loved it, the taste, the smell, the feel of Paige. She was so warm and soft, and wet, so very wet, Madison's nose and chin already covered with Paige's juices.

Madison sought with the tip of her tongue the center of her pleasure, wanting to make her feel as good as she had made her feel. She worried for a moment that she wouldn't be able to find her clit, but then she felt it, hard and swollen, the tip poking out from under its protective hood of skin. She ran her tongue over it, feeling Paige quiver as she circled it, pressing harder with each stroke of her tongue.

She covered it with her mouth and gently sucked, and heard a low moan from up above and felt Paige's hand move to her head, her fingers grasping at her hair. Paige was silently begging her not to stop, not to move, and she wasn't about to argue with it.

Encouraged by the sounds coming from Paige, Madison's lips and tongue moved over the hard nub, suckling it softly, not wanting to hurt her. She could feel Paige's hips move against her as she sucked, and when she felt her head being pressed down harder she gave her more pressure, sucking and running her tongue over her clit harder, causing Paige to cry out.

"Yes! Please...just like that, don't stop" Paige cried softly, and it only took several strokes of Madison's tongue until Paige was crying out, her body trembling violently as she came.

Madison placed several soft kisses there, on her throbbing clit, as she brought her hand up and used a fingertip to softly explore beneath her mouth, feeling the wetness and heat and seeking its source. She felt Paige stiffen as she teased her opening, running her fingertip around the sensitive entrance.

"Paige...I'm not going to go inside, I just wanted to feel you and touch you. I promise I won't go inside unless you ask me to," Madison said softly, and Paige, her eyes closed, nodded.

"Ok," she whispered, and Madison returned her mouth to her, sucking her clit into her mouth

softly and using the tip of her tongue to press against it. Her fingertip was still running circles around her opening, spreading the wetness that came pouring out all around.

Madison heard Paige whimper and felt her squirm as she teased her, coaxed her, and steadily sucked on her overly sensitive clit.

"Please," she heard, so softly she almost didn't hear.

"Please," she heard again, louder. "I want you inside," Paige finally gasped.

Madison reluctantly withdrew her mouth from where it was, and moved back up Paige's body, holding most of her body weight on her elbow. She looked down at Paige, breathing fast and looking at her with desperation in her eyes. Madison smoothed the hair back from her face and leaned down, kissing her.

"I want to be up here with you," Madison whispered, her other hand still pressed between Paige's legs, her fingertip still swirling in the wetness.

"I want you to see me and know that it's me...I want you to know that it is *me* loving you, me inside you," she whispered, her fingertip pressing inside, slowly, teasing in circles.

Paige squirmed in agony, and whispered one word, but it was the look in her eyes that said it all.

"Yes."

All fears cast aside, Madison slowly pressed her single finger inside, feeling it slide easily inside, the wetness slippery and slick, and she felt Paige draw her inside, covering her finger in heat and velvety softness.

Madison's finger was deeply embedded inside her but not moving yet. She knew how monumental this was, how the last time anyone had touched Paige this way...it had been brutal, painful, damaging. She blocked the thought from her mind as soon as it entered.

She kissed Paige's lips softly, and stroked lovingly inside her a fraction. She pressed her thumb against her clit, as she slid her finger deeper inside her, feeling her, exploring her.

She felt Paige relax beneath her, a breath let out in a whoosh as if it had been held. Paige opened her eyes and saw Madison looking down at her, her eyes shining with love.

"I love you," Madison said, as she slid her finger out and then back inside her, slowly.

"God, I love you," Paige gasped. "Please...please don't stop," she begged, and Madison smiled, her finger sliding smoothly back and forth now inside her, urged on by the gentle rocking movements of Paige's hips and her moans. Madison thrust inside her deeply, her thumb rubbing against her clit with each movement.

She heard Paige cry out loudly, Madison's finger moving within her faster, and faster, in a frenzied rhythm. Paige screamed out as she came, pulling Madison to her and clutching her tight.

"Oh god...Madison!" Paige screamed, her whole body going rigid for a long moment until at last she laid back, gasping, releasing her grip on her. Paige's eyes were closed, tears already streaming down her cheeks.

Madison kissed her eyes and her face all over.

Paige cried softly, her face crumpling as she burst into tears. Madison moved so that she lie by her side, and held her tightly to her.

"Baby," she murmured, her voice low and comforting. "My love," she whispered, lovingly, pressing soft kisses on Paige's forehead. She held her quietly, letting her cry and release the raw emotions, the relief and the pain.

"I loved tasting you, and feeling you...it was amazing," she whispered in Paige's ear. "And I loved being inside you. I love that you trust me so much, Paige. I would never do anything to hurt you, baby."

Trying to recover, Paige sniffled and took a deep shuddering breath.

"I know you won't," she said, softly. "You feel so good.... I never thought...that I could feel like this, and you make me want it all, want to give myself to you, and let you...love me."

"And you're doing it so beautifully," Madison smiled. "It means so, so much to me. All I want is make you feel loved, and cherished, and good."

Paige clung to her harder. It was Madison, who had been inside her...her Madison, who loved her. There was no pain, it really did feel good, so very good. She couldn't help the tears from coming. She held onto Madison tightly, not wanting to move from this spot, ever.

"You do make me feel good," she said, "You have always made me feel good, and safe, loved, and...you still do. You love me perfectly." She said, still trembling all over.

Madison answered this with a soft kiss. "And I will always love you Paige. Always." She knew that such promises were usually said frivolously and insincerely, but she meant it with every particle in her, and she knew that there would never be a day she spent on this earth that she didn't love Paige. It was unimaginable.

Madison held her in her arms for a long time, just holding and kissing her gently.

That evening they decided to get out of bed and get dressed, and Madison insisted that they go

into town for dinner.

"You are not going to cook tonight," she said, tapping Paige's nose. "Let me take you out to dinner. I know I've got the whole date thing a little backwards but it'll make me feel better," she said.

"Oh how the tables have turned," Madison chuckled leaning in to kiss her. "Now I get to tease you and make *you* blush!" Paige shook her head but for once, had no quick come back.

Madison cupped her face in her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Are you ok?"

Paige smiled. "More than ok."

Madison pressed another kiss to her lips. "Just checking. Are you ready to go?"

Madison drove them into town and they found a cute little Italian restaurant. Paige ordered spaghetti and Madison Eggplant Parmesan, and Madison ordered the wine.

The food was good but the company was even better, Madison thought, as she sipped her wine. Not that Madison was focusing on her meal anyway. Paige was talking, laughing, smiling shyly over at her and flirting shamelessly with her, even kicking off her shoe under the table and running her toes up Madison's leg playfully.

"You look radiant tonight," Paige said, smiling across the table at Madison.

"That's funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you," Madison grinned. She leaned in closer, taking Paige's hand in hers and stroking her skin softly.

"Are you happy?" she asked, seeing it in her eyes but wanting to hear it.

"Yes," Paige said, beaming, her face glowing. "I have never been this happy, I never knew it was possible to be this happy," she said, squeezing Madison's hand.

"What about you...are you happy, Doc?" she asked softly.

Madison smiled shyly, brushing off the old feelings of guilt that came along with the nickname. How could anything that felt so right be bad? She thought about making love to Paige and she felt no shame...just unbelievably perfect and happy.

"Yes," she said. "So incredibly happy," she smiled at Paige.

Madison's food lay largely neglected, as she was held enchanted by Paige's stories about the bookstore and art school. They spoke about all kinds of subjects, from childhood experiences to their favorite Broadway musicals.

Madison was in awe...of her, of how incredibly happy Paige was, joyous, full of life. She felt herself falling deeper and deeper in love, moment-by-moment. She was constantly amazed at how healthy Paige was, so soon, stunned, really, at the level of trust and intimacy they had already shared. So many of her fears were gone, any remaining ones well...they simply didn't matter, nothing mattered but loving her, taking care of her and making her happy.

As she watched Paige torment her unknowingly with another noodle sucked in between those pink soft lips, she had an idea and she smiled to herself.

It was their last night here and she wanted to do something special for Paige.

"Sweetie, I'll be right back," she said, getting up from the table. Paige watched her walk to the back of the restaurant. She returned a few minutes later with small boxes and a doggy bag for their leftovers.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked. Paige nodded and stood up from the table. As she put the food in the containers, Madison leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"Good, because I have plans for you tonight, my love."

Paige nearly dropped the box of eggplant. She glanced over at Madison and smiled shyly. Madison had never felt such love and desire before in her life.

When they got back to the bungalow, Madison put the leftovers away and steered Paige over to the couch.

"Ok, now I want you to sit here, and watch TV for a minute...and don't follow me," she warned, teasingly.

"Why? Where are you going?" Paige asked, frowning.

"It's a surprise. So be good and I promise, I will reward you for your patience," Madison said, bending over to kiss her. "It won't take long, I promise," she said, and she went into the bedroom and closed the door.

As much as Paige wanted to know what she was doing, she decided to behave and stay put, though she was dying of curiosity.

It felt like hours but in reality, about 15 minutes later Madison came back out. She was wearing a black silk robe, and she smiled and took Paige by the hand and led her into the bedroom, and then through the bedroom into the bathroom.

Paige let a small gasp as they entered. There were dozens and dozens of candles glowing, all lit up, casting the room in a soft pink and yellow flickering light. The old-fashioned claw foot bathtub was filled with steaming water and bubbles, and soft music from the bedroom was playing. Paige turned around, looking at Madison in amazement.

"You did all this?" she asked.

"Uh huh," Madison said, smiling.

"For me?"

"Yes, all for you," Madison smiled. "I wanted to do something special for you tonight. You have given me...so much, I want our last night here to be beautiful and special." She said, moving closer to her.

"Everything with you has been beautiful and special," Paige said. She looked truly stunned. In truth, nobody had ever done anything like this for her before.

Madison picked up her hand and held it in hers. "*You* are beautiful and special. I want to try to show you how special you are to me." she said, bringing Paige's hand to her mouth and kissing it.

Madison drew her close to her, kissing her lips.

"Can I undress you?" Madison asked. Paige smiled.

"Yes, of course you can undress me," Paige said. "I am yours, Madison,"

Madison swallowed hard, overcome. "You're mine?" she asked, wanting to hear it again.

"Yes, I am yours, completely and utterly, mind, body and soul," Paige said, leaning in to kiss a stunned looking Madison.

When she pulled away, Madison began unbuttoning her shirt slowly, and as she undid the buttons, she glanced up.

"I love the sound of that. I am yours too, I hope you know...I think I have been yours for a lot longer than even I realized," Madison said, seeing a small grin cross Paige's face at this statement.

She removed Paige's shirt and turned her around, undoing the clasps of her bra and sliding that off her shoulders. She kissed the back of Paige's shoulders and brought her arms around her

front, cupping both her breasts in her hands, holding them gently and squeezing softly as she kissed up Paige's neck. Reluctantly Madison released her and turned her around again, undoing her jeans and tugging them down, along with her panties, and helping her step out of them. She removed each sock and then led Paige over to the bathtub, her eyes roaming over Paige's body as she helped her into the water, holding onto her hand.

Paige lowered herself slowly into the water. The water was hot, but not scalding, and she sank down into the water with a groan of pleasure.

"Mmmmm...this feels so good," she said, the bubbles piled up high all around her.

Paige looked up at Madison, who smiled as she untied her robe and opened it, revealing bare skin underneath. She moved slowly as she disrobed, hanging her robe up on a hook before she came closer and stepped into the tub, lowering herself down into the water carefully, facing Paige.

Paige moved closer to her in the water, smiling broadly. "You're so sexy," she said. "I like this bath so far."

Madison laughed softly.

"I'm glad you do...but there is more," she smiled. "Lie back against me, sweetie," she asked, and Paige turned around and lay back against Madison's chest, surrounded by warmth.

Madison couldn't keep her fingers from reaching out and running over Paige's wet, slippery skin, down her arms, across her tummy, and caressing her breasts that were just cresting at the surface of the water.

"You feel so good," Madison whispered in her ear. Paige squirmed a little in her arms.

Madison lowered her head and kissed the side of Paige's neck, Paige leaning her head back exposing her throat to her touches. Madison's wet fingers slid from the water and touched where her mouth could not, tracing softly down Paige's jaw and down her throat, leaving a trail of water. Madison's hands found their way back to her breasts, rolling both nipples in her fingers, feeling the slippery smooth skin and hardening nipples beneath the warm water. Paige whimpered and moved against Madison, who responded by tugging on her nipples and licking the edges of her ear at the same time.

"Ohhh," Paige moaned, languidly at the dual sensations as she writhed in the water pressing back into Madison. She could feel Madison's breasts against her back, the stiff nipples brushing across her back whenever she moved.

"Turn around, sweetie, and face me," Madison said, softly. Paige maneuvered herself around and sat facing her once again. She looked so relaxed, so very sweet, her hair half wet, plastered to her neck and back.

"You look so beautiful wet," Madison said, smiling and reaching out to touch her face. Paige smiled at her choice of words.

"Ok now, lay back," Madison said, and Paige noticed a cloth pillow attached to the end of the tub to rest her head on. She lay back against it, her knees bent. Madison picked up a washcloth and poured some liquid body soap on it.

She picked up one of Paige's feet and extended her leg out straight, and began rubbing her toes and cleaning her foot, moving over her skin in slow circles. She glanced up at Paige and saw her watching her, her face trusting and content, allowing Madison to wash her.

She continued to scrub her all over softly with the washcloth, up her calves and behind her knees, her thighs, then skipping up to her hips and tummy. She moved forward and sat between Paige's legs, her legs crossed and Paige's legs on either side of her. She brought the washcloth up, cleaning her chest, and then gently ran the cloth over a nipple, rubbing in circles all over her breast, and then coming back to the nipple and dragging the rough cloth over it again.

Paige closed her eyes and purred her approval. Madison repeated this on her other breast, and every time she ran over the sensitive tip with the cloth she saw Paige squirm a little.

Madison ran the cloth up her neck and gently washed her neck, then moving down to her shoulders and her arms. She cleaned each hand, each finger, and as she was doing this Paige's eyes popped open and she looked up at her.

"You've washed my hands like this before," she whispered, looking shocked.

Madison took a deep breath and nodded, continuing to wash her hands lovingly.

"Yes, I have," she said, her eyes meeting Paige's.

"You were so gentle," Paige whispered. Madison smiled softly, the memory painful yet precious all at once.

"I tried to be, sweetheart."

"Why did you come for me that night, why didn't you just let them deal with me at the hospital?" Paige asked, her voice breaking slightly.

Madison set down the cloth and held her hands in hers. "I couldn't bear the thought of that happening to you," she admitted. "I've never been angrier in my life then when I got there and they were trying to restrain you," she added. "I think I scared them all."

"I remember you yelling at them vaguely...but mostly I remember you holding me."

Madison looked thoughtful. "I don't know why, but I felt so protective of you. Why did you come to me so quickly? I never knew why you trusted me so much, but you latched onto me

like...like a little koala." Madison said, smiling. "The instant you did that I felt this bond with you, and it never...ever went away," Madison said, realizing it even as she spoke.

"I knew you would never hurt me," Paige said. "I knew you would protect me. And you did."

Madison lifted one of the hands she was washing and kissed it tenderly.

"I'm sorry if I ruined our bath," Paige said, sadly.

"You didn't ruin it at all," Madison said. "You made it better. I love that you remembered me washing your hands. I wanted so much to make everything better for you that night...and that is still what I want, now." She picked up the cloth and trailed it through the water down over her tummy and then down between Paige's legs, spread open with Madison sitting between them.

She ran the cloth over the silky curls, and then between slightly parted lips. Paige was still relaxed as she stroked softly with the wet cloth, lightly rubbing the coarse material over her sensitive clit and down the length of her sex. Soon she was squirming and writhing against the cloth, her hips pressing up, wanting more pressure.

Madison dropped the cloth in the water and replaced it with her fingers, slipping them in between slick folds. She could feel the slippery wetness all around that had nothing to do with bath water. Her fingertips circled Paige's soft clit, pressing down until she whimpered.

Madison slowly withdrew her fingers, not wanting to continue this in the bathtub. She had other ideas. Paige opened her eyes, and let out another whimper of disappointment at the sudden lack of contact.

"Come here...I want to hold you," Madison pleaded, and Paige lay her body on top of Madison's, feeling her arms go around her and hold her tight.

"I don't want to stop touching you...But I want to wait till we got out of here. I have plans for you, like I said," she smiled, and Paige squirmed against her.

"I love you so much," Madison whispered.

"I love you," Paige murmured, kissing her lips softly and resting her head on her chest. Madison let her hand stroke Paige's wet back softly, until she felt her shiver and realized she was half sticking out of the water, which was growing tepid anyway.

"Let's dry you off and get you warm," Madison said, smiling down at her. She pulled the plug and helped Paige to stand up. She dried Paige off lovingly, and led her to the bedroom. They climbed under the covers together, and cuddled up for warmth. Their lips sought each other out and the kisses soon grew deeper, hungrier.

They were soon more than warm enough as Madison kissed her way down Paige's neck, taking her time, exploring her skin with her mouth and teeth gently. As she inched slowly down, she

brought her hands up and lifted Paige's breasts in her hands, a thrill washing over her as she felt the softness and weight of them. She had never imagined that another woman's breasts could be so intoxicating, and she felt as bad as a teenage boy in her excitement over them. She lowered her face to them, nuzzling her cheek across the soft skin and felt a stiff nipple drag across her face. She brushed her lips across it and drew the nipple into her mouth, sucking softly.

Paige sucked in a sharp breath as Madison's mouth tugged on her nipple, feeling a jolt of pleasure go straight down her body and making her throb between her legs. She watched in fascination as Madison worshipped her breasts, her hand lightly stroking Madison's hair. She wanted to push her down, where she needed her most, but fought the urge back, recalling that she had promised her this opportunity earlier.

She didn't have to be patient for long, Madison was just as eager to move further down and she did so quickly, trailing wet kisses down her tummy and settling between her thighs, gently spreading her open and dipping down to taste her.

Paige was so incredibly wet, and Madison groaned as she felt the hot liquid cover her face, her tongue gathering as much as it could and savoring the taste of her, wanting to drown herself in it.

She ran her tongue over Paige's swollen clit and felt her jerk, a small gasp escaping her mouth. Madison repeated this several times, enjoying the physical and vocal responses in Paige's body. She ran her tongue down and lapped at the entrance, slow, teasing strokes that made Paige moan and clutch at Madison's head, trying to push her in further. Madison stiffened her tongue and slid it inside, more than happy to follow Paige's cues, velvety walls encasing her tongue.

Madison moaned into her and stroked in and out of her with her tongue, swallowing the liquid that came with her, and then moved her tongue back up to the sensitive nub, getting a sharp cry from Paige.

The two lovers slipped into a natural rhythm, Paige's hips moving in circles to meet Madison's mouth, until she cried out in ecstasy, her body tensing up as she pulled Madison harder into her, riding out the waves of her orgasm on her tongue.

As Paige went limp beneath her, Madison lapped softly at her, feeling the last tremors of Paige's orgasm as she brushed her tongue lightly over her clit.

Madison moved back up, needing to see her, kiss her, and hold her. She felt arms enclose her as she lay back down on top of her, and kissed Paige on her mouth, her lips coated with her wetness. They kissed deeply, Paige making soft little whimpering noises.

When they drew apart at last, Madison looked down into her eyes.

"Are you ok, my love?" she asked softly smiling down at her.

"Mmhhh," Paige murmured. "So good," she added. "I love tasting myself on you,"

Madison groaned softly at these words, licking her lips. "I love tasting you," she said, "I never imagined it would turn me on so much but I can't seem to get enough," she whispered, lowering her face into Paige's neck, embarrassed.

"I love that you love to taste me," Paige said, smiling, and stroking her hair. "I'm glad that it turns you on because...your mouth feels so incredible on me," she said, sighing. They kissed again, passions flaring again hotter and brighter than ever before.

"Paige," Madison moaned, feeling Paige's fingers between her legs, seeking, impaling her deeply. "Oh god, yes," she murmured, as Paige stroked inside her.

Madison moved her hips helplessly, feeling her fingers glide in and back out, stroking lightly over her clit as they moved back and forth within her.

"I need...need to feel you too," Madison whispered, her voice rough with desire.

"Yes" Paige murmured, and Madison slid her hand down, feeling her move her legs apart, pressing her fingers into the wetness her mouth had been on just minutes before. With a low moan, Madison found the opening she was seeking and pushed two fingers inside her, slowly.

"Oh baby, you feel so...sooo good," Madison almost cried, feeling Paige's inner walls squeezing on her tightly, almost sending her over the edge.

Paige moaned loudly and thrust her hips up, driving the fingers deeper inside her.

"Madison!" she cried out, her voice sharp and pleading, her own fingers still stroking in and out of Madison.

Hearing the need in her voice, Madison covered her clit with her thumb as she pulled her fingers out and thrust back up inside her, deeply, eliciting a low, languid moan from Paige's lips.

They slowly began to move together, their breaths coming faster and harder, moving slowly within each other in unison.

Paige had never felt anything so intimate, her fingers inside Madison, Madison inside her, filling her, possessing her, connecting with her, as their bodies became one. She had never felt so close to anyone before in her life.

"Please...come...come with me," Paige whispered as she felt the ball of fire deep down inside her starting to explode. "Oh Madison, god, I'm coming!" she cried, her hips thrusting up and forcing Madison's fingers deep inside.

It was all Madison needed to push her over the edge, as her orgasm ripped through her, and she came with Paige, the intensity of their orgasms causing them both to cry out loudly.

Gasping for breath, they moved together, and gradually slowed the movements of their hands, Madison finally lying still on top of Paige, breathing hard.

They lay in silence, both recovering, Madison's head resting on Paige's chest, and she listened to the beating of Paige's heart as it slowly returned to normal. They were both covered in sweat, but it felt glorious.

Madison finally lifted her head and looked up, seeing the peaceful, sated look on Paige's face. She moved up a little, kissing as she went, until she pressed a kiss on her lips.

"That was so amazing," she whispered, looking down into the blue eyes staring back at her in wonder.

"Completely amazing," Paige whispered, in agreement. "Did you...did you feel like we were..."

"Like we were connected...like we were one?" Madison asked.

Paige nodded.

"Yes...I felt it, sweetie. I've never felt so complete, so perfect as I do with you, like this," Madison murmured, kissing her face softly, slowly, all over.

Paige wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled her closer. "Don't ever leave me," she whispered, her voice small and frightened.

Madison's heart lurched, "Paige...don't you know I could never ever leave you? Please don't ever say that again...I only want to be with you, love you. I will never leave you."

Paige breathed out deeply, slowly, and held her close. "I'm sorry...I just felt this panic when I thought of losing this," she whispered.

"You won't lose this, or me...do you understand? I don't care what we have to work through or deal with, and I'm not saying it will always be easy, but all that matters is you. As long as I make you happy, and you want me, I want to be with you. You are...my life, my heart, my breath. You're a part of me," Madison said, her voice breaking.

Paige smiled, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I love you."

"I love you, precious girl." Madison said, kissing her lips softly. She rolled off her, covered them back up and pulled Paige into her arms, needing to hold her close. Paige rested her head on her chest and wrapped an arm around her waist.

They lay in silence, not needing any other words right now, just the feel of their arms wrapped around one another. Madison stroked her soft hair and drifted off to sleep, more fulfilled and content than she had ever been in her whole life.

Dropping Paige off at Leah's the next day when they returned was probably the hardest thing Madison had ever done, feeling utterly alone and empty as she drove home. She got a text an hour later.

-Ouch.

She smiled ruefully, knowing at least she wasn't alone in her misery.

-Come here and I'll kiss it better

She wrote back, and laughed at the reply

-Tease

Madison attempted to readjust to life alone, wandering around the large empty house, unpacking. As she put away her clothes, something fell onto her bed. She picked it up, smiling. It was the green heart shaped rock Paige had picked up at the beach. She rubbed it wistfully, and opened her bedside drawer. She set it inside on top of the sketch Paige had given her.

When she looked in the bathroom mirror later after her shower, Madison laughed at herself. She wondered how she was going to justify wearing a turtleneck in July.

As she walked out onto the mat, Paige looked around anxiously until she spotted Madison. She was sitting right in front, a huge smile on her face. Paige couldn't smile back but she felt a thrill of happiness, knowing that she was here, a wave of nausea as well, her hands trembling in nervousness.

It had been a month since their trip to Whidbey Island, and Paige was finally ready to move up a rank in her Tae Kwan Do class. At least she hoped she was.

The Kwan Master came out onto the mat, and the students all bowed their heads respectfully. Paige was dressed like the others in a plain white uniform tied at the waist with a belt. Her belt was yellow, like all the other students competing that night.

The Master bowed back, and turned to the audience.

"We have met tonight to support our students as they participate in their promotion test to advance to the next rank. They will demonstrate their readiness by showing their physical skills as well as their mastery of our basic tenants: courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit," the master said, as she walked past the students who were all kneeling now on the mat.

Madison smiled to herself. If anyone had an indomitable spirit it was Paige. Perseverance was a strong point for her as well, Madison admitted with a chuckle to herself.

"All of the students begin with a white belt. The white belt symbolizes purity. These students started out pure and without the knowledge of Taekwondo. As with the pine tree, the seed had to be planted and nourished to develop strong roots. They now wear the yellow belt, meaning, the seed is beginning to see the sunlight.

They will now demonstrate what they have learned to achieve their next belt, the camouflage belt. This belt symbolizes the sapling which is hidden amongst the taller pines, which must now fight its way upward."

Madison watched raptly as the master barked out instructions in Korean and Paige moved quickly to comply. All the students stood in a circle around the outside of the mat. Paige and another student, a young man, walked onto the mat and faced each other.

They bowed to one another, placed their protective helmets on, and then took defensive stances. Paige moved quickly, kicking her leg out and making contact with his side. A bell rang, indicating she had scored a point. Her opponent steadied himself and attempted to kick back, but only managed a light blow to her arm before she swiveled out of reach. Madison watched, riveted to the sight. Paige looked so self-assured, so focused. There was no hint of fear in her, no hesitation as she swung her body around, lifting her leg high almost straight up over her head, impacting with his helmet again. In a few short minutes it was over- the guy was on the floor, Paige was standing, and the bell was rung three times in succession.

"The score was 12 to 2, and as the rules of the Kwan state, when an opponent reaches 12 points the match is over," the Master explained to the audience.

Paige and the young man faced each other and bowed. Everyone clapped politely, but Madison had tears in her eyes and wanted to whoop and holler. She forced herself to be quiet and clap calmly with the others, her eyes shining with pride and love as she watched Paige.

After all the students had competed against one another, they took turns attempting to break a board with their kick.

"This skill shows self mastery, self control, and power of the mind. It is not the strength of the foot that breaks the board, it is the strength of the imagination, visualizing the boards breaking in

two," the Master explained.

It was Paige's turn. She adjusted her belt, then let out a short, sharp yell, snapped her left leg forward, and smashed her foot through the board, showering the mat with splinters.

After bowing to the Master, she turned around and walked back to the mat, flashing Madison a smile and a wink. Madison grinned back proudly.

At the end of the evening, after several other demonstrations of their readiness, the Master presented eight of the ten students with the camouflage belt. Paige was one of them. When everyone got up to go congratulate the students, Madison made her way through the crowds, looking for the tall dark haired girl.

She finally found her, talking with another student, smiling and laughing. Madison stood back and watched, not wanting to intrude, and took the opportunity to gaze upon Paige and love her from afar. Paige glanced up, feeling the intense stare. She walked over to Madison smiling.

"Baby I'm so proud of you! You were amazing." Madison whispered fiercely, hugging her hard. She let go and Paige held out her new belt.

"Wanna tie it on me?" she asked.

"Yes, I would be honored," Madison said softly.

She untied the yellow belt and replaced it with the camouflage one, tying it snugly around Paige's slim waist.

Madison stood back and looked her over admiringly. "It looks very intimidating," she said. "And sexy as hell," she added under her breath. Paige was grinning from ear to ear.

"Should I be afraid?" Madison asked, glancing over to the broken pile of boards on the floor.

"No," Paige said. "I would never hurt you, but the next time a butch flirts with you at a bar, you might want to warn them about me before I kick their ass," Paige smiled, innocently.

Madison laughed. "You *were* jealous of that butch weren't you? But how did you get rid of her so fast?" she asked, suddenly recalling the scene at the bar.

Paige shrugged, trying to look innocent. "I just gave her a look, that's all," she said.

"A look? What kind of look?" Madison asked.

Paige tried to imitate it but couldn't keep a straight face. Madison laughed helplessly.

"Well it must have been scarier than that. I hope you know I wasn't interested in her, the poor thing. I was too busy trying to keep my eyes off you out on the dance floor."

Paige smiled softly. "I got my dance with you eventually. It just took a little more effort."

Madison laughed.

"You know...speaking of that dance...I think you should wear that dress again...I was having awfully wicked thoughts when you were wearing it that night, but I couldn't act on any of them," Madison admitted.

"Were you? Was this before or after I threw myself at your feet?" Paige asked.

"God, I was such an idiot," Madison muttered. "And before. Definitely before. AND after."

Paige smiled. "Maybe I'll wear it over one of these nights and give you a private dance," she smirked.

Madison felt a warm rush between her legs as she pictured it.

"Dear god, be good" she murmured, turning red. Paige laughed and took her hand.

"Ready to go?" she asked. Madison nodded, suddenly wanting to get away from all these people around them.

They left the studio hand in hand. Madison mildly wondered at herself, at how interesting it was that she had no qualms about being publicly "out" with Paige. It was never an issue, she couldn't try to hide it if she wanted to.

She'd spent too much time trying to hide it from herself, and now that she was allowed to love her...she wanted the whole world to know.

It was Saturday afternoon and Madison was pushing a cart through Home Depot, trailing after Julia. She sighed, looking as her rather short friend climbed up on to a shelf to reach something.

"Julia, why do I always let you talk me into stuff like this?" Madison whined.

"Oh come on, you know you love shopping with me," Julia called back over her shoulder.

"I hate Home Depot! It just reminds me of how many things I need to fix up in my house," Madison said.

"Well, Todd said if I got all the paint and supplies he would paint the living room. You know how long I have wanted to repaint in there," Julia said, now flipping through a book of paint

samples.

Madison scowled. She had always hated hardware stores, ever since she was little and her father would drag her into them and wander around for hours. There is only so much a nine-year-old girl can do in a store filled with nails and spackle.

"You're just grumpy because your love muffin is working today," Julia teased.

"Julia!" Madison said, warningly. "She is NOT my love muffin," Madison said, trying not to crack up. She finally laughed, Julia joining in.

"Ok, ok so she IS my love muffin. God. You're so tasteful. I miss her, Julia. I hardly get to see her anymore between school and her work, and mine." Madison complained, scuffing her shoe on the floor.

"God, you are so pathetic!" Julia said, throwing her hands up in the air. "I'd go crazy if Todd didn't work so much and go out of town once in a while. I need my alone time. You two are like...glue. Stuck together at the hip every possible moment," she laughed.

"Yeah but at least you get to go to sleep with him every night and wake up with him in the morning," Madison pouted.

"Trust me, that is NOT always a good thing," Julia protested. She looked at Madison's face, and saw real anguish there.

She put her hand on Madison's arm. "Maddie, if you really are this miserable why don't you just ask her to move in with you?" she asked.

Madison looked stunned, and opened her mouth and closed it again.

"Move in with me? I- I don't know... I mean, she'd probably think I was a freak or something. It's only been a couple of months since we...since we-"

"Since you first made sweet love together?" Julia piped in, helpfully.

Madison shot her a glare. "No. I was going to say since we got together. My point is, it's too soon...for her, I mean. She has her own stuff going on. She'd probably think I was being too pushy. Besides, she's talking about getting her own place."

Julia stared at her for a long moment.

"We are talking about Paige here, right? Tall, dark, drop dead gorgeous? Honey she worships you. She loves you. She is living in a tiny two bedroom apartment with her best friend and her boyfriend...I'm sure that's not fun. She's talking about getting her own place because she's not going to *ask* you if she can move in! You have this huge gorgeous house and a warm bed with her name written all over it. You should ask her. Besides, don't most lesbians move in together

like, after the second date? "

Madison snorted at her friend, but contemplated the idea for a moment. She hadn't really allowed herself to think about it much. She had assumed that Paige wouldn't want this, not yet anyway...but what if she did? They both talked about missing each other all the time. She seemed just as unhappy as Madison every time she had to leave. *What if I am just being stupid and stubborn again?* Madison wondered.

Julia saw the conflicted look on Madison's face and decided to pounce.

"Maddie! Forget about my living room. I have SUCH a great idea," she said, grinning conspiratorially at her. She glanced at the paint sample book in her hand and back at Madison.

Madison paced the floor, biting her nails before she caught herself and shoved her hands in her pockets. She hadn't been this nervous since...well...since the night at the beach house when she had first made love to Paige. The memory made her grin like a fool and then she remembered why she was pacing and the grin disappeared.

She looked out the window again. No sign of her. She walked into the kitchen and poured a glass of wine, drinking deeply and trying to distract herself. She heard a knock at the door and almost dropped the glass, setting it down hastily. She smoothed down her hair and took a deep breath.

She walked to the door and opened it, and gasped softly in shock. It was Paige, yes, but...she was standing there in her little black and silver dress, from that night at the club! Madison fumbled for words...words...those things your mouth does when it isn't completely dry and useless.

Paige smiled at her, fidgeting with her hands nervously. Madison was still standing there, speechless.

"Can...I come in?" Paige finally asked, stepping closer.

"Sorry...hi," Madison finally choked out, leaning in and kissing her. She stepped back to let her in and felt her stomach churn with nerves.

She closed the door behind her and followed Paige into the living room.

Paige looked at her, her eyebrow raised quizzically.

"Is something wrong? Do I have something on my face?" she asked. "Spinach in my teeth?"

Madison shook herself mentally. "No, nothing is wrong...you just look...so...beautiful," she

managed at last. She felt like she had that night, at the club...stumbling, trembling and terrified. Paige moved closer and put her arms around her.

"Are you sure that's all? You look terrified," she murmured, kissing her lips softly.

Madison remembered why she had been nervous in the first place. Suddenly a million doubts and fears rose up and she wanted to back out of the whole thing but...she knew she couldn't. She reminded herself to kill Julia the next time she saw her.

She kissed Paige back and pulled away, looking at her again. She smiled and ran her hand over a bare shoulder, and down her arm, and bent down to kiss the soft skin of her shoulder.

"That was what I wanted to do when I first saw you in that dress," she whispered, her eyes still gazing at the perfect, smooth round shoulder.

"Really?" Paige said. "You *were* naughty," she smiled, impressed.

She went and sat down in the large black leather chair, crossing her legs, covered in sheer black stockings. Madison stared, feeling her heart pound and her desire flare. She wanted to run her hands up those endlessly long legs and...

Get a hold of yourself Madison! She scolded herself. *You know you have to do this now before you chicken out.*

She went over to the chair and knelt down by Paige. "I have something to show you," she said, looking at Paige with large worried eyes. That she looked so stunning tonight wasn't helping matters, not at all. Paige looked down at her, her eyes questioning.

"What is it baby?"

Madison swallowed hard and stood up, holding out her hand to Paige. She took it, and stood, following Madison down the hallway. Madison stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned to her. She held onto her hand, took a deep breath and plunged in.

"I know you might think this is crazy...but I...I miss you so much when we're apart, and what I miss most is getting to be with you in those normal, everyday moments, like eating breakfast together or spending time together after dinner...I know we're both busy and have our own lives and I'm not trying in any way to change that or take that away. But I hate it when you leave, and I miss falling asleep with you in my arms. You're the first thing I think of and want to see when I wake up in the morning," she said in a rush, pausing for breath. She couldn't think of anything else to say, and Paige was standing there looking at her in confusion.

Madison opened the door to the guestroom and switched on the light. Paige looked even more confused now. The room looked different...very different. She stepped inside and looked around slowly.

The walls and ceiling were sky blue, with puffy white clouds painted on the ceiling. The bed was gone and there was a large white worktable and workbench in its place. There was an easel beside it, an office chair with wheels, and shelves built into the walls. Paige walked over to the shelves and saw every kind of imaginable art supply. Paints, paintbrushes, pastels, pencils, paper, canvas, sharpeners, erasers, clay, clay tools, poster board, glue, scissors...it went on and on.

Beside the worktable there was a bookshelf filled with books about art. Great big fat books filled with color illustrations of some of the greatest artists of all time. Picasso. O'Keefe. Da Vinci. Paige ran her fingers over the spines of the books. There was a huge oversized blue beanbag in the corner of the room. Paige, having made a full circle around the room, turned and looked back at Madison, still standing in the doorway watching her.

"What is this?" Paige asked finally, looking dazed.

"It's your room...your art room," Madison said, quietly, biting her lip.

"It's...its amazing! Madison but...why are you...why is there an art room for me in here?" Paige asked, still looking puzzled. Madison finally walked into the room and came up to her, cupping her face in her hands and looking into her eyes.

"Because I want you to move in here with me, and I want this to be your own room, where you can paint or do school work or just have your own space..." she said, softly.

"You're asking me to move in here...with you?" Paige asked.

Madison swallowed hard, suddenly afraid she might really turn her down or worse...maybe she'd be angry.

"Yes," she managed to say. "I am...I want you here with me as much as possible, Paige. I love you." She slowly lowered her hands from her face, waiting for a response.

Paige's face went through a torrent of emotions, from confusion to wonder...and then a smile broke out over her lips, and Madison thought it was the most beautiful smile she had ever seen.

"Oh my god...yes! Yes, yes, yes," Paige whispered, hugging her tightly and then kissing her hard on the mouth.

"You did all this for me?" she asked, looking around the room again in awe.

"Yes," Madison said, gruffly.

"What if I'd said no?" Paige asked, a smile twitching at her mouth.

"Then you still could have used it to study or work in whenever you were over here," Madison said, simply.

Paige looked at her, her eyes suddenly brimming with tears.

"Did you really not know if I would say yes?" she asked.

"I...I didn't know if it was too soon, if you were ready. I didn't want to assume you would want to give up your freedom or..." she trailed off, feeling more foolish by the moment as Paige's shining eyes bore into hers.

"Good god, Madison." she said, shaking her head. "I love you. I adore you. I miss you every second we aren't together. You know I hate sleeping without you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you...of course I want to live here with you," she said. She kissed her lips again softly this time.

"But you have to let me pay rent. And help with the bills," Paige added firmly.

Madison looked outraged. "Paige, that's ridiculous, you're a student, and I'm..."

"A doctor, yes I know, I think we have firmly established that fact, Dr. Nichols," Paige interrupted.

Madison just groaned.

"But I don't ever, ever want you to look back and think I was somehow...using you...well, I mean using you in THAT way anyway," Paige joked, with a lewd grin on her face, getting a grimace from Madison again.

"Of course I wouldn't! I would never think that. How much were you going to pay for your own place?" Madison asked.

"I don't know...probably around 1000 a month, between rent and utilities" Paige said. Madison bit her tongue, knowing Paige probably couldn't even afford it.

"I see the look on your face, Madison. And for your information, with my job and my sketches, I most certainly could pay that much!" Paige said, defensively.

"Look, how about this- I'll pay the utilities, including the cable and internet, and you pay the mortgage." Paige said. Madison knew the utilities sometimes came to 600 or more per month and frowned.

"Either that or I live across town, alone, and STILL pay that much every month," Paige pointed out. Madison scowled.

"Alright. But I want you to know this is not what I had in mind when I asked you to move in with me," she pouted.

Paige wrapped her arms around her. "Awww baby, I know. You wanted to sweep me off my

feet...and you did! I still can't believe you did this!" she said, gesturing to the room. "You are...so good to me. So amazing...nobody has ever done anything like this for me...I can't even tell you what it means to me. Thank you." Paige said, sincerely.

Madison, forgetting all about the money, simply kissed her in reply.

"I would do anything for you. This is nothing," Madison said. "So it's still yes? Say it again," Madison pleaded, pulling her body closer to hers.

Paige laughed through her tears. "Yes. I'm going to live with you."

"You've just made me the happiest woman in the world." Madison said, beaming.

"Not possible. I've already claimed that particular title," Paige smiled.

"Now...I believe I promised you a dance the next time I wore this dress," Paige said, her lips curving into a seductive smile. Madison felt her knees threaten to give way from under her.

"You were...serious?" she asked, her heart beating faster.

"Very serious," Paige said, solemnly, and taking her by the hand, led her from the new art room to the bedroom.

Ten minutes later, there was a very suggestive song playing on the stereo, candles lit and lights turned down, and Madison was sitting in a chair in the middle of her bedroom, gripping the bottom edges of the chair and watching Paige, who was a few feet from her. She was moving to the music, a sensual smile on her lips, wearing her black dress, stockings and shoes, her hips moving in circles, her arms raised above her head, dancing, and she was walking around Madison's chair, circling her slowly.

Her shiny dark hair was down, hanging loose around her face as she moved. She ran her fingers through her own hair, and with her other hand trailed her fingers slowly down her face, running them down to her lips, sucking her fingertips into her mouth and then slowly running them down her neck and over her breast.

Madison was having a hard time keeping her hands down, she wanted so badly to reach out and touch her, but her instructions had been explicit. No touching or the dance would stop.

Paige danced behind her chair, Madison's head whipping around to watch her, but Paige was running her fingers through Madison's hair now, scraping her nails across her scalp and pulling her head backwards, gently. She leaned over and brought her mouth down to Madison's lips, licking her own lips, as she grew closer. She stopped an inch from Madison's mouth, so close Madison could feel her warm breath on her lips, and then she pulled away and released her hair,

moving back around to her front, dancing seductively.

Madison struggled to stay in the chair and a soft groan escaped her mouth when Paige moved away. She knew she was in deep trouble. Paige did teasing better than anyone Madison had ever known.

Paige dropped to her knees, several feet away, and to Madison's shock began to crawl across the room to her on all fours. Madison sucked in a sharp breath as she watched, mesmerized. Her hips still swaying, bare shoulders jutting out sexily, Paige managed to make crawling look like...dancing, and foreplay all rolled up into one.

Her eyes were looking straight ahead, however, locked on Madison's. She held her there, in the blue depths of her eyes, as she crawled closer and closer. As she came near, Madison felt her heart race even faster. Paige was now right in front of her, and she smiled up at her in a predatory way that made Madison gulp nervously.

She rubbed her head up against her knee...*like a cat*, Madison thought. *Dear god.*

Paige pressed her face between her legs and nudged them apart, pushed her way between them, as she rubbed her face along the inside of Madison's jeans, moving closer and closer. She began to kiss her thigh softly, and then began biting at it, making Madison jump, thinking she was going to bite her thighs through the heavy material. Paige nuzzled her face right in between her legs, and Madison felt slight pressure there and then felt a blast of heat, Paige's hot breath blowing against the crotch of her jeans.

"Oh god," Madison moaned, white knuckling the chair to prevent herself from reaching out and pulling Paige's face into her harder. She gasped as Paige began to move her mouth against the seam of her jeans, right there, where she so desperately needed her.

She felt teeth tugging at the seam, felt the area grow warm and damp, whether from Paige's mouth or from her own excitement, Madison wasn't sure.

Paige sat up, on her knees still, her hands running up Madison's legs and up her thighs, and she was smiling at her, so beautiful, her eyes dark and shining, her lips looking swollen and red from working over the rough fabric of her jeans.

"Please," Madison begged, needing to touch her desperately.

"Shhh," Paige whispered, putting her finger over Madison's lips. She slowly stood up, still positioned between Madison's legs. Her one foot remaining on the floor, she lifted her other leg and rested her high heeled shoe on the arm of the chair, her knee bent, and began moving to the music, arching her back and then bending forward, lower and lower until she almost touched Madison's lap, before moving back up.

Madison's eyes went from her hips, which were right in front of her, gyrating in that devastating rhythm, to her thigh, almost fully exposed now with her leg up on the chair, the dress hitched up

even higher, and Madison gasped softly. Paige was wearing only thigh high stockings, with black garter straps holding them up. She could almost see higher, wanted to see higher...but she couldn't. She whimpered in frustration.

Madison looked straight up, her eyes falling on Paige's breasts, pushed together and almost spilling out of the top of the dress as she moved. She squirmed in the chair uncomfortably, trying to soothe the throbbing.

Paige lowered her foot from the arm of the chair, and bent over, her breasts swaying in Madison's face, the smooth black fabric brushing across her lips. Madison breathed her in and could smell her, her perfume and just...her essence. Madison's tongue stroked out, seeking skin, but tasting only fabric. Paige laughed and pulled back, shaking her head and looked at her sternly.

Madison shivered and half hoped she *would* stop, so she could touch her. Paige wasn't finished with her yet, though.

She hooked her legs through the arms of the chair, straddling Madison's lap, wrapping her arms around her neck and pressing her cleavage into her face. Madison thrust out with her tongue, rewarded with the taste of warm soft skin, her tongue plunging down the crevice between her breasts, and whimpered as Paige moved up and down on her lap, causing her tongue to stroke in and out of her cleavage.

Paige pulled back and then scooted forward on her lap, closer, her hips still rocking and moving, grinding down on her, and Madison couldn't help strain her hips upward to try to make more contact.

Catching her eye, Paige made sure Madison was watching as she ran her hands over her own breasts, finding her nipples and pinching them through the dress, tugging them and moaning softly. Madison almost leapt from her seat, but managed to hold back, her eyes glued to those fingers and the stiff peaks they were drawing from the fabric of her dress.

Paige thrust down again against Madison's thigh and let out a sexy, soft moan, making Madison throb painfully between her legs.

"Paige, please," she whispered, her face a picture of torment. Begging.

Paige looked down into her eyes for a long moment, searching them, seeing the need and desperation behind them. She smiled, and put her hand on Madison's face. "You can touch me now," she whispered.

With those words, Madison's hands flew off the chair, moving up to Paige's face and brought her face down to hers, crushing her lips to her, kissing her deeply. She felt Paige continue to squirm on her lap as Madison slid her tongue inside her mouth, needing to be inside her, somehow, right now, and taste her...feel her. When she released her long minutes later, they were both breathing hard, Paige's face flushed with desire.

Madison ran her hands over her arms, up to her shoulders and down her back, pulling her closer still. Her hands roamed down her back, and feeling the hem of the dress there she pulled it up, sliding her hands down to cup her ass, feeling warm soft skin and the straps of the garter belt. There was nothing else there, she realized with a shock. Paige wasn't wearing any panties. She felt a warm gush between her own legs at this discovery.

Madison's mouth lowered to her cleavage again, licking and kissing her there, the soft rounded tops of her breasts tormenting her. Her lips moved up her neck, kissing her throat, sucking gently in the most sensitive areas, until she felt another thrust down into her lap as Paige squirmed.

Madison moved one hand around to the front of Paige's dress, leaving her other hand still firmly gripping her ass, working under the hem of the dress in front. Madison took a deep breath and exhaled, trying to regain some degree of self-control.

"You drive me so crazy," she whispered, her fingers desperately seeking, searching, until she finally felt wetness and warmth. "I need you right now."

"Don't you want to go to the bed- oh!" Paige cried out, as Madison's fingers grazed the sensitive bit of flesh crying out for attention.

"No, I want you right here, right now," Madison said, fiercely, as Paige leaned forward, gasping. "I want you...in this dress, I want to take you with these stockings on and those sexy shoes wrapped around me...I want to feel you work yourself on my fingers and come for me...can you do that for me, Paige?" Madison asked, her voice raw with need.

Paige only whimpered, Madison's fingers rubbing her clit firmly now, as she ground down on them helplessly. She lifted her legs up, wrapping them around Madison's back, as Madison moved forward to give her room to maneuver.

"Yes, that's it, my love..." Madison gasped as Paige's legs wrapped around her. "Are you ready baby?" she asked, holding back as much as possible, her fingertips searching for her entrance, everything in her aching to be inside her.

"Yes, please," Paige pleaded in her ear, and Madison thrust her fingers deep inside.

Paige cried out, rocking on her hand.

"God yes...fuck me, Madison!"

Spurred on by those words echoing in her ears...fuck me Madison...*oh god*...Madison moaned and thrust her fingers in deeper, burying herself inside her. She felt Paige grind down on her hand, seeking more contact on her clit.

"Yes, that's it, baby...can you feel me deep inside you?" Madison murmured, sliding out of her and then plunging back in deeply.

Paige thrust down again, needing to feel her deeper, her arms going around Madison's shoulders, holding onto her tightly. "Yes!" she gasped.

"Say it again, please," Madison urged her, needing it like she needed air to breathe. "Tell me what you want."

"Fuck me, please Madison...fuck me harder!" Paige murmured, and Madison finally let go, all the gentleness and self-restraint of the past few months pushed aside.

"Mmmmm...yes baby, I am fucking you...I'm not going to stop fucking you until you come for me, Paige," Madison crooned, as she drove her fingers in deep, her hand making wet slapping noises as she thrust against her faster and harder.

Paige's cries were escalating with each thrust, the heels of her shoes digging into Madison's back, and Madison made sure her thumb was grinding against Paige's clit.

"God, I love you," Madison whispered roughly, as she fucked her, lovingly, deeply. "Come for me, baby."

"Madison!" Paige cried out, her nails digging into her shoulders as her entire body arched against her and her hips jerked down against her hand.

There was a gush of wetness on her hand, and Madison continued to stroke within her until Paige's cries weakened and she collapsed against her, her head falling down to rest on her shoulder, still clinging to Madison tightly.

Madison kissed her cheek, panting hard and dripping with sweat.

"I love you, my sweet, sweet girl," she whispered. "I love you so much...are you alright?" she asked, still breathing heavily, suddenly feeling panic-stricken. "Did I hurt you?" she asked, fearfully.

Paige nuzzled her face into her neck.

"I love you too," she said, "That was...incredible," Paige said, breathlessly.

At last, Paige lifted her head and looked into Madison's eyes.

"You didn't hurt me at all, Madison...you always love me perfectly. Now please, take me to bed?" she asked, softly, and Madison nodded, kissing her lips tenderly.

She withdrew her fingers from her slowly, gently, and brought them to her lips, needing to taste her, and sucked them into her mouth. Paige whimpered as she watched, and slowly slid off her lap, standing there on trembling legs, waiting.

Madison rose quickly, pulling Paige close to her and kissing her lips.

"You are the most amazing, beautiful, sexy creature to ever walk the earth," Madison whispered in awe, kissing her again deeply. "You're so stunning, Paige, I can't believe you are mine."

Paige just smiled at her, too overcome for words, but the love and devotion in her eyes said it all.

Madison led her to the bed and lovingly undressed her, pulling the dress over her head, removing her strapless bra and then laying her gently down on the bed, unhooked the garter straps, removing the belt, and peeled her stockings from her legs. She took her shoes off and kissed her toes tenderly, stripped off her own clothing and lay down on top of her, Paige covering her mouth with her own.

"I am all yours," Paige whispered, claiming her mouth once again.

Halfway through an appointment with a client, a loud banging on her office door startled Madison. She went to the door and opened it, and stepped backwards when she came face to face with a very hostile and angry looking Mrs. Randall. *Oh SHIT.*

"Dr. Nichols, I would like a word with you," Mrs. Randall began.

"Mrs. Randall, I'm with a client right now, perhaps-" Madison began, nervously.

"We can do this in front of your client or not doctor, it's up to you," Mrs. Randall snarled, pushing past her into the room. Madison tried to steady her voice, turned to her client, a man in his 40's, and sighed.

"I'm sorry Dave, would you please excuse me, this is an emergency," she apologized. "Can I reschedule with you for later in the week?"

"Sure, no problem," he said, and quickly walked from the room, glancing at Mrs. Randall fearfully.

He closed the door behind him and Madison sighed, turning to face her worst nightmare. She tried to block the images of what she and this woman's daughter had been doing the night before.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Randall," she asked, quietly, going to sit behind her desk to put some space between them.

"I think you know perfectly well why I am here," the woman said, slamming a manila folder down on Madison's desk.

"I knew something funny was going on between you and my daughter even back at that hospital! And then I saw these and it all began to make sense," Mrs. Randall fumed. She saw Madison wasn't opening the folder so she did it for her, spilling several large 8X10 photographs across the desk. Madison glanced down, seeing photos of her and Paige. On the beach, cuddling, walking hand in hand. Lying together in the hammock. On Whidbey Island.

"You were spying on her?" Madison asked, in horror.

"Not personally, no. I hired a private investigator. You didn't think I was going to let her go just like that did you doctor? I knew something was going on with her, knew someone had gotten their hooks into her and warped her mind. I didn't know it was you until I got these back."

Madison glanced down again at the pictures, her stomach clenching and the rage building deep down inside her. Those were her memories, her private moments. Her Paige!

"And now I hear she is moving into your house," Mrs. Randall said, her voice dripping with scorn. "Is this what you do with all your young, vulnerable patients, Dr. Nichols? Seduce them with your money and draw them into your sick fantasies, take them away from their families and then dump them when you are done with them? You are just as bad as those men who attacked her."

Madison rose from her chair, trembling violently from the effort to stay in control.

"You gave up any right to say anything to me when you gave up on your daughter!" she shouted. "You are no mother- what kind of mother says those things to her daughter? What kind of mother cares more about her reputation, her image, than the fact that three men raped and brutally attacked her daughter? Where were you when she was lying in a hospital bed, broken inside and hurting? Why weren't you there holding her hand and telling her it was going to be ok?" Madison raged.

"You abandoned her when she needed you, you threw her away like a piece of unwanted trash! Do you have any idea what you did to her, blaming her? Telling her it was her fault? You don't even know her! You don't even know how brilliant and talented she is! But I do, and I love her! I would never do anything to hurt her, and I will do everything in my power to make sure you never have that opportunity again." Madison said. She gripped the edge of her desk, willing her hands not to lash out and hit her.

"If you ever come near her or send another private investigator near us, I will take you to court and slap a restraining order on you so fast you won't even know what hit you." She said, her voice cold and hard.

Mrs. Randall drew closer and Madison braced herself for the blow. But it never came.

"You dare threaten me with a lawsuit? I should take *you* to court, taking advantage of a vulnerable young patient- there must be laws against that!"

Madison breathed deeply. "Mrs. Randall, Paige is twenty two years old and hasn't been a patient of mine for months. I assure you, if you waste your time and money taking me to court they will laugh you out of the courtroom. There is nothing illegal about two consenting adults who love each other."

Even as she said it, Madison felt a surge of relief. She realized she finally believed it herself. There really *wasn't* anything wrong with it. She released a deep breath, letting go of any guilt and doubt she might have still been harboring.

"I hope she breaks your heart and then leaves you. She's good at leaving, or haven't you noticed, doctor? When things get hard she will turn and run away like she has from every other thing in her life that didn't go right. You're a fool if you think she actually cares for you." Mrs. Randall scoffed.

"Paige is the strongest person I know, Mrs. Randall. She'd have to be to have put up with a mother like you. Now," Madison said, standing up and walking to her office door, opening it.

"Get the FUCK out of my office. And don't ever show your face here again or I will call the police." She said in a low, dangerous voice. Mrs. Randall seemed to struggle with herself, and then stormed out past her.

"You two deserve each other!" she screamed as she walked out of the office.

Madison slammed the door behind her.

"Yes. We do." She mumbled to herself, slumping against the door and sighing.

The day after the office incident, Paige moved in. She didn't have a lot, so they were able to fit everything in Madison's car in one trip. Madison made room for her in the bedroom, making sure she had empty drawers and room in the large walk-in closet. All of her art supplies went into her art room, and Madison walked in on her organizing her worktable with a smile on her face, as she leaned against doorway watching her quietly.

Paige turned around and saw her there, and went to her. She took Madison in her arms and hugged her.

When they pulled away, Madison stroked her face softly, smiling at her.

"Welcome home," she said. "Are you happy?"

Paige grinned, unable to contain her joy. "Ecstatically happy. You?"

"Unbelievably happy," Madison said, "I can't believe I'll have you here with me, every night...every morning. It's too good to be true," she said, pressing a kiss to Paige's forehead.

"Well it is true, believe me, I've pinched myself enough times today to know it's real," Paige said, with a laugh.

"Pinched yourself? I thought that was my job," Madison said, her fingers playfully pinching along Paige's ribs, making her squirm and laugh, letting out a loud squeal of protest.

Madison laughed and stopped, taking mercy on her. Her face grew more serious as she thought of what she had come to talk to her about in the first place.

"Sweetie, I need to tell you about something that happened yesterday." Madison said, and Paige looked alarmed, seeing the worried look on Madison's face.

"What is it?"

Madison sighed deeply, running her fingers through her hair.

"Your mother showed up at my office," she said.

"What? Oh god...why? What did she want?" Paige asked, looking upset.

"She was...well she confronted me about...us," Madison said.

"Us? How did she know anything about us?" Paige demanded, looking outraged. "I haven't told anyone who would have told her...not even my father."

"She hired a private investigator," Madison said, "She had...photos, Paige," she added, cringing.

"What photos? Of us?" Paige asked fearfully. "Where?"

"Whidbey Island," Madison said. "Do you want to see them?" she asked, not wanting to keep anything from her.

"Yes! But what did she say, what did she do?" she asked, fearing for Madison.

"She said..." Madison hesitated, refusing to repeat the vile words that had poured from Paige's mother's mouth. "She thinks I am taking advantage of you and basically repeated more of the same crap. She didn't do anything, love," she added, trying to reassure her.

"Oh god, I can only imagine what she said to you," Paige groaned, hiding her face in her hands. "Please don't listen to anything she says...I hope you didn't," she pleaded.

Madison took her hand in hers. "Paige, I know better than that. Of course I didn't. It took all my

will power but I didn't touch her, even though I wanted to desperately. Anyone who is blind enough not to see how amazingly incredible you are doesn't even deserve that much effort," she said.

Paige took a deep, shaky breath.

"What did you say to her?" she asked, finally.

"I told her that I love you and would never hurt you. That she was blind not to see how amazing you are. And that if she came near us again I would get a restraining order. And then I told her to get the fuck out of my office," Madison laughed, horrified and glad all at once that she had given that woman a piece of her mind.

Paige hugged her fiercely and then kissed her cheek. "God, I love you," she said. "I can't believe my mother had us followed! How creepy," she shuddered. "Wait until I tell my dad about this, she really has gone too far. I mean, I've always known that she resented me, I think it's because my dad doted on me so much when I was little. I don't know. She and I were never close that way. And when I got older she seemed...jealous of me. Jealous of my looks, my clothes, my friends. Anytime I won an award or got a good grade she would compare it to herself and how much better, smarter, prettier, popular she was when she was my age. I don't know why but I think...she hates me," Paige said, her voice trembling with emotion even as she tried to brush away the hurt and look like it didn't bother her.

Madison took her in her arms and held her gently.

"I won't bore you with analyzing your mother, but please believe me sweetie, it is all her problem, and not you. It was never your fault." She said, pressing a kiss to her cheek. "And she is the one who loses out, because she will never know you, the real you, and you are...the most beautiful person I know, inside and out," Madison said.

Paige looked at her, finding enough comfort and love in those eyes to fill the ache in her heart and then some.

"Thank you," Paige said. You are the most amazing, incredible person...how'd I ever get so lucky?" Paige smiled. Madison replied by kissing her lips softly.

"Can I see them? The photos?" Paige asked. Madison led her to the kitchen where she pulled them out of her briefcase. Paige opened up the folder and leafed through them. Madison watched her face as she glanced over them. Paige picked one out and held it up, looking closer. Her face broke into a smile.

"Well, if we had to get spied on at least we got a decent photographer," she grinned. "This is one of my favorite moments there! And now I have a photo of it to remind me of it," she said. Madison laughed, shaking her head.

"Leave it to you to find the silver lining," she smiled, affectionately. She looked at the photo in

Paige's hand. It was the two of them in the hammock, Paige lying in her arms with her head resting on her shoulder, Madison's arms wrapped around her holding her close. They both looked happy and content.

Madison couldn't help smiling as she looked at it.

"It was one of my favorite moments too," she whispered, kissing Paige's forehead.

"Now, do you want me to help you make lunch in "our" kitchen?" she asked, playfully, too overjoyed at having Paige here with her, at last, for good, that even her mother couldn't put a damper on it.

"Well, doctor, I'd rather take you to "our" bedroom and do lots of evil things to you," Paige said. "But I suppose there's time for that later...lots and lots of time."

Madison shook her head and laughed. "What am I going to do with you?" she asked.

"Anything you want," Paige shot back, grinning. Madison groaned softly and pulled her in for a long, deep kiss.

When they pulled apart, long minutes later, Paige smiled. "It's good to be home," She said.

Madison looked in the mirror, frowning. "Are you sure about this?" she called out. Paige poked her head out of the bathroom and looked her up and down.

"Yes! You look gorgeous! Don't you dare take that off." She said, her head disappearing. She popped it back out again, adding, "That's my job, later!" and popped back out of the doorway.

Madison laughed.

"It's just so...sparkly," she said, looking doubtful. She was wearing a silver sequined sleeveless shirt and white pants, which Paige and Julia both insisted looked fabulous on her. It was nothing she would have ever picked out herself, her own tastes running more conservative but...well, anything Paige wanted, Paige got, she thought, smiling indulgently.

Madison checked her hair, her blonde unruly hair tamed into a bun at the back of her head, her bangs hanging loose around her face. She had to admit it did look glamorous, but still...

Paige walked out of the bathroom and Madison swiftly forgot about her own clothes. She gazed at Paige as she stood at the vanity mirror in the bedroom, putting her earrings in. She was wearing a long sleeveless tight fitting red dress, outlining her figure perfectly, with matching red shoes. She had threatened to wear her short black and silver dress but Madison pleaded with her not to.

"There is no way that I could stand there and be social and polite...I'd be a blabbering idiot every time I looked at you," she said, and Paige had laughed gleefully at her and then taken pity.

Madison wasn't so sure now that she saw her in this red dress, whether she would be any better off.

Her silver teardrop earrings in place, Paige walked over to Madison and wrapped her arms around her neck. "I like sparkly," she said, smiling. Madison couldn't resist and smiled back.

"Then sparkly I'll be. You look...stunning," she said, running her hands down the sleek sides of her dress. "And you feel even better," she added, trailing her fingers across the exposed skin on her back.

They kissed, softly at first and then surrendering themselves over to it, becoming lost to anything but the feel of their lips and tongues hungrily exploring, until Paige pulled away at last, breathing hard.

"Gonna ruin our make-up," she panted, and Madison was tempted to say, "Who cares?" And toss her on the bed, but she refrained. This was a special night and she wouldn't ruin it for anything.

They arrived at the art school on time despite the unscheduled kissing delay, and Madison felt her heart bursting with pride as she escorted Paige inside, her hand on her arm. Inside, the lobby was filled with people all dressed in their finest, sipping champagne and eating hors d'oeuvres.

Paige stopped and said hello to several people, introducing Madison. They both accepted a flute of sparkling champagne and sipped it. Paige looked nervous, and Madison smiled at her reassuringly, stroking her hand softly.

A man walked over to them, beaming at Paige as he approached. He was older, perhaps in his sixties, with graying hair and a mustache. He wore a black Tuxedo and looked excited to see her.

"Paige! I'm so glad you made it," he said, coming up and putting his hand on her arm. Madison fought back a twinge of possessiveness, watching their close interaction. Paige smiled back and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

"Hi Michael. I'd like you to meet my girlfriend Madison," she said. He shook Madison's hand firmly.

"Ah, how nice to finally meet you, Madison. Paige certainly mentions you often enough," he smiled. "I'm Michael Woods, the Director here at the Art Center. Paige is a joy to work with and instruct- she is extremely talented," he said.

"Yes, she is, I've always thought so," Madison replied, glancing at Paige proudly. Paige picked up her hand, holding it in her own. "Madison has always been my biggest supporter," she smiled, looking over at her.

"Well then it seems we have a lot in common," Michael said. He nodded at them both and wandered off.

"I'm glad to see you getting the recognition you deserve for your talent," Madison said, turning to Paige. "I am so proud of you I could burst."

Paige smiled bashfully. "That means more to me than any award ever could," she said softly, and then leaned closer and whispered in her ear.

"I like it when you give me very...vocal recognition for my talents...the ones I only share with you."

Madison felt the heat rush to her face. A loud screeching noise prevented them from flirting any further.

"Testing, testing," Michael said, speaking into a microphone. He smiled and looked up at the crowd who was now all looking at him.

"I would like to welcome everyone here tonight, to the annual Art Center awards night. Each year we like to come together with our loved ones to recognize and celebrate our most talented and hardworking students. Tonight I have some really amazing talent to share with you and I couldn't be more eager to introduce them to you."

Everyone clapped, and Madison saw Paige grow paler and paler.

"You're going to be superb," Madison whispered in her ear. Paige smiled weakly and bit her lip nervously.

"Our first student receiving an award tonight is a first year. She has already shown exceptional talent in free hand sketching and painting and has shown a great aptitude for graphic art. This award tonight is the first of many for Ms. Randall, I am positive. Please help me in congratulating Paige Randall for her award for her charcoal drawing," he said, and everyone clapped once again.

Paige left Madison's side and walked up to the microphone. Michael handed her a plaque, which she took from him with a smile, and took the microphone.

"Thank you Michael. Wow, I um, don't know what to say, I never thought I'd be here at this school let alone holding an award," she said, nervously. She cleared her throat. "I really just wanted to thank my dad, who can't be here tonight, who believed in me enough to help me follow my own dreams, and most of all, I want to thank the love of my life, Madison ..." she glanced up, meeting Madison's eyes from across the room.

Madison smiled at her encouragingly, hoping she couldn't see the tears.

"It's because of her I am here, at all...and it's because of her that I'm receiving this award tonight," she said. "Thank you," she added, blushing furiously, and handed the microphone back to Michael. He took it back, and spoke into the microphone.

"Oh, and here is Paige's drawing, entitled "A Safe Place," he said, and he removed a white sheet from a large framed drawing sitting on an easel beside him. Madison looked up and saw it.

It was a drawing of the two of them, at the beach bungalow in the hammock...with Paige wrapped up in Madison's arms. Just like the photograph. She had gotten their expressions just right, a look of adoration plain on Madison's face, Paige gazing up at her lovingly. She had even drawn the glass of wine set next to the hammock on the table, Madison noted, smiling through tears.

A Safe Place...one could interpret that to mean the hammock, or even the bungalow or the Island. But Madison knew something nobody else here knew. Paige's safe place was her.

Just as she was thinking this, she saw Paige approach her, and she opened her arms. Paige moved into them and she held her tightly, not caring who was watching.

After several moments of simply holding each other, they drew back a little and looked into each other's eyes, both of their eyes wet with tears.

"You are my safe place," Paige whispered.

Madison nodded, feeling the tears spill over.

"I always will be, and I will always love you, Paige. Always."
