

~ D'Artagnan ~

by Zee

Disclaimer:

I wish to disclaim I hate doing the disclaimer. This story revolves around a lesbian. So I'm guessing if the word lesbian bothers you don't want to read this.
No real violence to talk about until much later in the story. As for sex, yes its in there.
Enjoy.

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Part 1

I stand outside the dirty brick building smoking a cigarette. I know its silly and that I can smoke inside, but I need a moment. I need to stretch time out a little farther so I can put them off for another minute or two. Oddly the "them" I'm trying to avoid are my friends but as the saying goes, "with friends like this who needs enemies," for better or worse they are my friends. I've known them forever: we grew up on the same block, got into trouble, started clubs, and went to the same - elementary, middle and high school together. As puberty hit we discovered boys and then girls. It wasn't until college that I broke the cycle and dropped out, but they continued on becoming the three musketeers with me as the ever aloof forth member. I'm more of a sidekick to their Athos, Porthos, and Aramis not even really ranking as a D'Artagnan, but that's fine because I couldn't wield a sword if my life depended on it and chicks defiantly do not fall at my feet with their bosoms all a heaving. Mmmmm, heaving bosoms. Sorry I was having a moment.

My so called friends as well as everyone's parents still give me crap for dropping out of college, but I like my life just fine, I think.

I take a long last drag and let the ashy butt fall from my fingers onto the gravel below and then I grind the hot cherry under my boot heel. Wiping my hands on my jeans I open the door to 'The Closet', I haven't got a clue to who originally named the bar but they certainly had a twisted sense of humor. The Closet was the first openly gay bar, here in town. They were here and queer and proud of it in this two-horse town. Since then a men's bar called Matt's and a gay friendly dance club called the Castle has opened, yep my town is a regular gay Mecca.

My favorite bar however is The Closet, it's old and has personality, it may have had a brief life as a cowboy bar before its secret life as the gay place to be. The décor is all old worn wood, which makes it seem cozy and relaxed to me. I also DJ here on weekends so my loyalty to the place is also bought by the fact they give me a paycheck.

Its not even ten o'clock on a Thursday night so the DJ hasn't started yet and the tiny dance floor is empty of life. The few people who are in the bar sit around watching the TV's set up on the walls around the room; or are playing pool or darts.

I spot Jen first she's leaning up against the pinball machine working her charm all over some poor girl. Her blue-eyes are shining a bit -- probably from the thrill of the hunt. A quick glance and the others are spotted sitting at a table, as I walk over to join them Ashley spots me giving a wave. I wave back as she nudges my sister sitting next to her.

Olivia looks up and follows to where Ash is pointing, she smiles and raises an empty pitcher in a clear sign that if I want to drink I need to go get it. Sighing I head for the bar, they love me just for the free beer I know it.

I wait at the bar; Jeff is around somewhere probably changing a keg in the back. I tap the wood with my thumbnail until he comes from around the corner his mouth stretching into a smile.

"Carmen. I didn't know you were the DJ tonight."

"I'm not. Just meeting some friends."

"Ah, the brat pack." He nods knowingly.

I just give a laugh; I'm not sure how we got that nickname but it's ours. "Can I get a pitcher of Bud Light and a glass?"

"Just one glass?"

"Yep, looks like they started without me."

"One glass and one pitcher coming up."

As he passes the beer my way I grin and ask what the damage is. "It's on the house. If $\frac{1}{4}$ " he pulls the beer back from me. "If you bring Kevin with you tomorrow night. It's my night off." Jeff says with a goofy grin.

I just give a laugh. My buddy Kevin is the heart breaker of gay men everywhere. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask."

I give another smile and walk back to the table with the fresh pitcher in tow. To my surprise Jen has returned to the table but she's girl-less. "Oh my did you strike out Bridgewater." I know it sounds snarky, but I know she can give far better than I can.

"Shut it Carmen. She's on a date and didn't want to be rude. I'll be going out with her tomorrow."

"Oh." Secretly I want to be there the day somebody uses her and not the other way around.

"My you certainly look like a big old dyke tonight. What's up with that?"

I roll my eyes. I hate when they start picking apart my clothing choices. Next will be my lack of

direction and why I should go back to college and apply myself.

"Let's see." Ashley starts. "Baseball cap turned around. 501's, a t-shirt, and Doc Martins all you need to finish it off is a flannel."

"Bite me."

"I would but I don't think you could handle it." Ashley shot back.

Ugh, beer. I need beer. Beer will make the whole evening better. Beer good. I think to myself as I fill my glass up. The more I have to drink the better I will be able to deal with them. I sip my beer happy that they have moved on to things other than my clothing style. Jen Bridgewater is the reigning queen of our pack and we are but her lackeys. She's tall and beautiful in with long chestnut hair and blue-eyes that would make a Nazi jealous. She's a lawyer in her father's firm so she has it all: the looks, the brains, and the money. Unfortunately, she's a major bitch and she really does think she's God's gift to women. As I understand it she likes it rough, and no I don't know this from personal experience, I mean I did have a small crush on her but I've so gotten over that. I know this useless piece of info from some of my girlfriends or ex-girlfriends that she stole from me. One or two came back telling tales and pleading their 'I'm sorry' and blah, blah. I'm sorry if you've slept with Jen I won't touch you with a ten-foot pole.

I know that Jen and my sister Olivia are fuck buddies on occasion, she never talks about it but sometimes I see a mark or two and I just know. My sister and Jen use to date until Jen broke it off. I think Olivia is still in love with her, but that's none of my business. Olivia is about two years older than me we both have dark hair and pale skin, her eyes are more of a gold why mine are brown. She works as an upper level manager for MR Technologies. She's a good sister but I wish she'd get over Jen and start dating seriously.

Then there's Ashley. She's got short spiky hair that she's started dying blonde; she's the shortest of us at 5'4". Its funny that she was calling me a dyke when she looks like the queen of stereotypical dykes, but oddly she's bi-sexual. Actually Ashley is just sexual, she doesn't let a little thing like gender slow her down. She works as an accountant for the local correctional facility. I'm brought out of my musings by someone yet again telling me what my problem is.

"You know what your problem is, Carmen?"

Christ here they go again. Its going to be my clothes again or college.

"Your too nice you let people just walk all over you."

I snort, "Yeah like you guys."

"Hey that was uncalled for."

I roll my eyes again and reach into my pocket for a cigarette and matches.

"Don't even think it." Jen growls out.

Sighing I put them back, it's a bar I should be allowed to smoke other people are smoking. Olivia gives me a shoulder hug, "So sis what have you been up too?"

"Oh you know the usual. Working at Fleet Feet Couriers and here spinning disks. Oh I went mountain biking with Kevin today."

"You know if you went back to school and got a degree you could be making a lot more money^{1/4}"

I cut Ashley off. "I like my life guys." I need a break from them and there critique of my wasted life. "I'm going to go outside and smoke."

They just grunt at me and turn their attention to the bar patrons sizing up potential conquests.

Outside the air is tangy with the scent of spring that is just arriving on the heels of winter it is almost sweet and bitter like you can taste winter's anger at being replaced by spring. I sniff again catching a whiff of lilacs. A small smile tugs at my lips at the smell and I pull out the pack of cigarettes, but it almost seems sacrilegious to block out that smell.

I fumble with the matches wondering what I did with my lighter. I could have sworn I had it before I entered the bar, but lighters are tricky that way. Lighters are an unfaithful lot and have a tendency to wander, but matches are loyal they stick with you even if you accidentally wash them. I finally get the match to light and I make an assign comment in my head, *look Carmen make fire*. I follow that thought with some ape grunting noises. I made a funny and I chuckle at myself. Suddenly a voice purrs in my ear, "You shouldn't smoke you know. Its bad for your health."

What the fuck? I jump back startled. My head whips around to the left and I am struck dumb. I am so cured I will never ever light another stinken cancer stick again if she will be my reward for kicking the habit.

The voice is attached to the most gorgeous thing in the female gender that I have ever scene. She is taller than me with short curly red hair and deep blue eyes, which I'm sure, would look like the ocean if I had ever seen the ocean.

My mouth gaps open and the unlit cigarette falls to the ground but I don't really care.

"Sorry." She says with a grin, which makes me think she's not sorry at all. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh it was my pleasure." I croak out all suave. But oddly it is my pleasure because my long lost libido that I had thought had gone south for the winter only never to return has comeback with a big old howdy in my pants.

She arches a red eyebrow at my comment.

"Oh shit. Here let me get the door for you." I quickly get the door open and she smiles and that smile makes me a big happy puddle of naughty thoughts.

"Thank you." She extends a hand. I take it floating on cloud 9. "Anna Russell."

"Uh, er, uh. I'm Carmen Webster."

Her eyes go slightly large, "Really?"

"Uh, yes." Something strange has just happened and if my libido would quit doing the happy dance in my jeans I could probably figure it out. However, before anything more can be said and exchanged she walks away into the bar, I think she muttered something like "my you've changed." I must be hearing things cause to imply that I've changed would mean taking on the assumption that we know each other before now, but I know there's no way I would forget someone like Ms. Russell¼ le roew.

The door closes and I let her get away but I just shrug, she so out of my league why dwell on it. I stoop over and pick up my fallen comrade and strike another match.

While I'm standing outside drawing the nicotine goodness into my lungs, I toy with the idea of just going home, but I know if I leave without saying good-bye I'll never hear the end of it. I ponder if it's worth it and then put the cigarette out and go back inside nothing is ever worth the shit they give me. As I go back into the bar I'm not surprised to find every drunken eye in the place latched on to the newcomer, Ms. Russell. However, I am surprised that Jen isn't trying to work her magic all over Ms. Russell.

Jeff is mixing the beautiful red head a drink at the bar. He catches my eye as I walk in and gives me an evil grin. My brain screams, *don't Jeff. Don't do it. For the love of God don't do it.* But its too late I know what's coming.

"Carmen." He shouts out.

"Jeff." I reply back lamely.

"Come over here." He wiggles his hand in a come here gesture.

I slink over to the bar trying to hold off the potentially awkward social situation that I know is coming.

"Carmen we've got a new patron to 'The Closet'. Carmen I want you to meet Anna Russell, she's visiting us from New York. Anna this is our resident Friday and Saturday night DJ." He paused letting them say their hellos before starting up again. "Anna since you are new to our fair city you'll need a tour guide. Carmen here being unattached would love to help you out."

Anna quirks an eyebrow, "Really."

They way she says 'really' makes the word naughty, well naughty in a good way. Honestly I love Jeff and all the gay boys at 'The Closet', but I do wish that they would mind their own damn business and stop playing matchmaker. I can feel the skin in my cheeks flaming out under her gaze.

"I¼ I¼" Come on Webster make a sentence here. "I, sure, I could play tour guide."

Ms. Russell's red, moist, lips, purse into a delicious smile. "Hmmm. What if I wanted to play something other than tour guide?" She asks with an innocent expression on her face while her lips drip innuendo.

My face turns even redder. Oh jeez, she's flirting. Women don't flirt with me.

"Uh¼" I stammer. Come on Webster flirt back you can do it.

"If you're looking for someone to play with around here I'll be more than happy to help you out." Replies Jen's voice from behind us.

Shit. Game over. I can't compete with Jen. Jen brushes past me whispering, "So out of your league Carmen." She grabs Anna's hand and kisses the knuckles.

For the first time I am really and truly angry with Jen, even though I let her do this shit to me all the time. "Jen." My voice comes from somewhere and it sounds pissed.

Jen looks at me clearly taken back but it doesn't last her face shifts into predatory mode. "Go away Carmen. Ms. Russell and I were having a private conversation."

"I¼ I¼" Is all I can stammer out as I look at the players. Jeff looks pissed at Jen and Anna just looks amused at the whole thing. Fuck it a woman I have known for all of five minutes is not worth Jen's wrath. I turn and go back to the table. As I approach I see my sister looking wistfully at Jen and Anna, and Ashley looks delighted.

Ashley looks up at me sipping her beer, "Whoa there. For a minute I thought you might have finally grown a pair." She jokes.

That's it. "I'm out of here."

"Awe. Jen stole your toy so now you're going to go home and pout."

"Shut up Ash!" I nearly shout. She looks befuddled at my anger.

I turn to my sister and I can't take the whipped puppy dog look on her face, "and for Christ's sake Olivia get over her and move on with your life." She just looks at me her golden eyes becoming moist and I feel like a shit. Disgusted with my friends but mainly with myself I stomp out of the

bar with one thought burning in my head. *Got to get me a better class of friends.*

My exit of righteous indignation complete I stand lost on the street corner unsure what to do. Should I go try to meet up with my roomies at the Castle? Or should I just head for home? Maybe Collin's Bar and Grill will have a live jazz band tonight I could check out? At a loss I automatically reach in my pocket for another cigarette, while I think over my options for the evening. Fumbling; I yet again can't find my lighter but I come up with a book of matches. I tear out a stick and strike it.

"I thought you might have listened to me the first time."

Ms. Russell had snuck up on me again. "Wha..? How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Sneak up on me?"

"You must think too loud. I was hardly sneaking."

Suddenly I realize the match that I had lit a few moments ago is now cooking my fingers to a light golden brown. Goddamn Ms. Russell is distracting. "Ow! Fuck!" Okay yes not the smoothest things to utter in female company. I release the burning match.

"See." She says with a sinful smile, "I told you smoking was bad for you."

I ever so suavely hold my burnt finger up to my mouth and blow on it to relieve the pain. This whole situation is weird. I'm not the type of girl other women flirt with or chase after. Nope no chase after girl here. Jen is the type that happens too. So needless to say I'm having a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that this gorgeous, hot woman is out here, with me, standing on at street corner at 9:45 at night. When she could be inside being smooth talked by Jen.

We're standing and I'm trying to think of clever dialog to engage her in¹/₄ well something other than, "There's this motel up the street. You game?" I'm pretty sure she's the type of girl who would slap me if those words came flying out of my mouth. After a moment or two I give up on the clever dialog and go with, "Um, was there something you wanted?"

She looks at me and I swear its one of those smoldering looks I've read about in lesbian romance novels.

"Yes." She states. "There is something I want." She takes my hand the one I am now absently holding near my mouth. I'm not blowing on my finger any more in fact I've forgotten how to breathe. She slowly kisses my burnt finger and then opening her mouth her tongue pokes out. It is swirled along my skin and I can say honestly there is no more pain in that finger. She gives it a light kiss the tongue bath complete and releases my hand; it just flops down to my side.

"I was hoping you might take me back to your place."

Uh. Jesus. I haven't had sex in like 2 years and my sex drive is burning rubber and running laps in southern region. "I, I, c-c-can't." What the hell? What is wrong with me?

My libido is doing the salsa of the sex fairies but the rest of me is scared by this amazingly hot woman and her rather aggressive come on. Okay in all fairness if I was Jen it would have been a PG rated come on, but I'm not Jen I'm me, and me is scared.

"Oh." Is all she says with a disappointed look and I want to kick myself in the head.

"Your more of a challenge than I thought Ms. Carmen Webster." She pulls out what looks like a business card and slides it into my back jeans pocket. I forget how to breathe when she does that.

"If you change your mind there's my number call me." Leaning over she kisses me lightly on the lips and turns and goes back into the bar, back to Jen.

I really want to tell her to comeback, but I don't. I feel like I missed an opportunity of a lifetime. Damn it I need beer, the Castle it is.

I'm having the best dream; it has to be a dream cause nothing like this would happen to me in real life. For once I didn't do the nice thing or the right thing. Instead I let that aggressive woman pick me up so I could take her home. Oh God. The things she can do with her tongue. Oh jeez. It's never felt like this. Its all hot and pulsing like there's lava in my arteries and the sex fairies have started a union and they're all buzzing around my ears. It just keeps building, this heated pressure expanding out until it's too big for my body to contain. This isn't real. This isn't right. It's never like this. This is some unrealistic fantasy feeling that only women in cheesy romance novels and porno's feel. It can't really be like this. My skin can't hold it anymore its bigger than me and I'm coming hard and I'm falling out of bed.

Damn. Even in sleep I knew it was too good to be true. Lying on the floor sticky with my own sweat my heart thumping in my chest and my oh, um. I think I had an orgasm. I thought I had one before, but now, now I'm not so sure. Damn that was, intense, would seem an appropriate way to categorize what just happened but I think I will use the word weird. This is so unlike me, for crying out loud I had a wet dream. I'm 26 years old not a 16 year old boy.

"Hey Webster you okay?" One of my roomies asks through the door.

"Uh yeah. I'm fine."

"You didn't bring someone home that we were unaware of?"

"No." Smartass I never bring anyone home; it's a big joke with them. "Just a bad dream." *A bad, evil, very bad even, nasty sweaty dream.*

"Okay." With that I hear footsteps walking away.

I lay back down on the floor where I landed. Since I only have a mattress on the floor I didn't have far to go. I reach over to the crate I use as a nightstand and grab my glasses so I can see the time. Its almost noon but I don't have to work at the courier service so I'm free until 10 tonight. I need to do something to get my mind off of my dream and my new state of arousal. I'll give Kevin a call and see if he wants to go mountain biking. As I sit up I get a sniff of myself, but first a shower one should not walk around the whole day smelling ones own arousal.

The music is pounding tonight. I love it. What is even better nobody has come up to request a slow cheesy love ballad. They all want to dance out there on the dance floor, be eaten up and consumed by the controlled chaos of the music and the other bodies gyrating on just the nice side of obscene.

I haven't seen Jen, Ashley, or my sister at all tonight. They're probably at the Castle, this place just isn't their style on the weekends, from what I understand there are some pretty cozy dark nooks where one can get lost in for a quickie. Not that I would know about that, I have a hard enough time asking for a dance let alone quick sex with a stranger in a somewhat public place. I look over and see Kevin with Jeff.

Kevin is an odd boy. I've known him for like what seems forever. In the classic boy meets girl, he stuck gum in my hair and I beat him up at recess we were like in the 4th grade at the time. Growing up when I wasn't hanging with the "brat pack" I was hanging with Kev. My mom was thrilled I think she even made all these grand plans in her head for our wedding. Unlucky for my mom she got not one but two gay daughters and Kev who's a real flamer himself.

Kevin comes from this really wealthy family. His parents are divorced and he and his mom live here. His mom doesn't work she just lives off his dad's money. Kev also comes from a very religious family. He has sever internalized homophobia issues and can't seem to reconcile his faith with his being gay. Every once and a while he freaks out on himself finds some girl to date and tries to be "normal". Whatever that is. After a week or so he's fallen of the straight wagon and is back to being gay.

The gay boys love him he's a really hottie, I guess, but for as long as I've known him he's only ever slept with one guy. Kevin and this guy had some tawdry affair that would be the envy of any daytime soap plot. The guy just left him high and dry. No good-bye or anything.

As I look around some more I see Sue and Rob, two of my roomies, over at the pool table. They have a band with the other roomy Ed. Sometimes when they want something brassy in their set they'll ask me to come play with them or sing back up to Sue. Okay, I'll just get this over with now. Yes, I was a band geek. I play the trumpet. I was also stuck in the church choir until I grew into a moody teenager and refused to do it anymore. Sue and I actually had band together in high school she played the flute, and no I'm not telling if she ever went to band camp.

My attention quickly shifts to the dance floor and a new couple I've never seen at the Closet before. One is Asian with short black hair and the other is white with long curly blonde hair. They are a beautiful couple and they dance very well together. Okay, they look like they're having sex on the dance floor. Only with their clothes on and standing up. Well I guess it really isn't that unusual to have sex standing up¼ I'll just stop the train of my thoughts now. There really isn't any need to dwell on tits; I mean it, any longer. God knows I've never had sex standing up. Stopping that train again and switching to thoughts of golf now.

I begin my mix into the next song now it's a disco song by Abba that some old Queen requested; it clears the floor slightly but not to bad. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jeff trying to get my attention. He's waving and pointing. Kevin just looks amused. I'm trying to read lips. It looks like he's saying, "she's here."

"What?" I mouth back.

"She's here."

What the fuck? Who's this "she"? I try to look where he's pointing but I don't see¼ oh. Oh Shit! It's the aggressive Ms. Russell. I'm so screwed and I so need to be mixing into the next song.

The mix is horrible I can see people muttering on the dance floor. Once the horror of the transition is over I look around again for Ms. Russell and find her coming my way. She smiles at me and it's a dangerous sexy sort of smile as she stops short of the DJ booth.

"May I come in?"

"Uh, yeah, sure." Danger! Danger!

She pushes through the swinging door and she's suddenly here with me in the tiny booth.

"You didn't call me." She says with a breathy pout.

In all honesty when I remembered about the card she had so naughtily slipped into my pocket I did war with the idea to call her. In the end however, I talked myself out of it.

I am reminded of why I should listen to organs other than my brain as she stands before me. She is wearing tight black leather pants and a white button up shirt with the bottom buttons undone to expose a yummy stomach.

Damn I had forgotten about that breathing thing again.

"Carmen my eyes are up a little higher."

Oh right. "I was just noticing how in shape you are." I am so out of my league. I'm wearing baggy jeans, my superman shirt and a blue visor. I look like a club kid.

"Thank you." She says and I blink at her. What is she thanking me for? I have to rewind the conversation in my head. Oh right.

She continues to look at me and I fidget till I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "And about calling you. Well, you really intimidate me." I cringe in horror. Can I be any more of a dork?

She throws her head back and laughs. Oh look at that I forgot how to breathe again. I have this sudden urge to wash my fingers in the fiery river that is her hair to see if it is as soft and silky as it looks. I snap back to reality, song ending. Turning to the mixer even though it means removing my eyes from her. I almost forget to hit play as I feel her come up behind me. The heat that burns from her body into mine is delicious. I can feel it scorching the skin of my back.

"I would really like to see you again." She whispers into my ear.

All I can think is that it can't be healthy for a person to be deprived of oxygen like this. I force my lungs to remember their purpose in life and I force my brain back to the task at hand. I'm fading out of one song while bringing the other up. For a moment the two songs blend together their rhythms in sync matching each other a lot like good sex I imagine. Mental slap. Okay I really need to get laid two years is too long to go without. Finally the next song is a go and Anna hasn't moved from behind me.

"Ah, could you back up a little?"

Her breath is hot in my ear again and a shiver hurls itself down my spine. She felt that I think cause I feel her smile. "You didn't answer me." Is all she says.

"Backup a little and I will." This is how Jen acts; all forceful queen bitch of the world sort of attitude, and I hate it. However, on Anna it just makes me horny.

She steps back and leans against the wall all cocky self-assured.

"I'm really baffled here. Women only do this to me when they want to use me to get a date with Jen. I see it. It's a brief flicker but I saw it in her eyes. Shit.

"Get out!"

"What?"

"You just want to use me to get a date with Jen. I can't believe this. Get out."

"I don't know what you are talking about." She acts confused and slightly offended but its too late I'm on to her.

"Look I'm sick and tired of being used as a spring board for Jen. Now get out."

"Alright. I'm leaving, but I did just really want a date with you. This isn't about getting a date with Jen."

I cave slightly maybe I was wrong. "I'll think about it." I grumble as I turn back to the mixer.

I watch her off and on during the night. She knows the Asian and blonde chick, I watch them laugh and drink together. I also watch her dance. The way she moves, lets just say she's a very naughty dancer and the sex fairies are back doing the polka in my jeans.

It's just cruel the way I'm stuck back here and she's out there. Not that it would matter I dance like a drunken cow with only three legs.

"Hey sexy mama." Kevin and Jeff have decided to join me

"Hey boys."

"How's the resident fairy duster?"

"I'm good."

"But wouldn't you like to be better? I bet you'd be great if you were dancing with that red headed vixen."

I quirk an eyebrow, "Duh. Who wouldn't be?"

"Go on go dance your dance of 1000 idiots I'll spin for an hour and Kevin here will keep me company."

"You sure?"

"Yep. Go on."

The headphones are removed and I move quickly out of the booth and out on the dance floor. I know, well, I'm 98% sure that she's using me, but there's something about her. Truthfully she's hot and I'm horny and I don't really care much at this point. I mean I just don't have sex fantasies about just anybody. Okay, so she's the first. Where the hell is she? I swear I just saw her out her shaking her groove thing not but 2 seconds ago.

Suddenly two hands grab my hips pulling me into a warm body. I smell the faint scent of lilacs and I know it's her. My body freezes and she whispers in my ear.

"It's okay. Just relax and move with my body."

We dance together and it's like we're the only ones on the dance floor. I'm wrapped in her warmth and the heady scent of lilacs, and before I know it I have to go back to the DJ booth.

"Stay and dance with me." She whispers.

I want to. "I can't."

She pouts.

"Tomorrow, I'll call you." Somewhere I've gotten brave, but it's not hard because I think she's caused my hormones to get all out of whack. I start to leave the floor and she grabs me.

"Wha¹/₄" and my lips are covered by hers.

It's not a gentle kiss, but it's not rough. I think it's a 'don't forget to call cause this is what you'll be missing' kiss. In the distance the gay boys shout pointers.

Her lips leave mine and I stare at her stupidly. Articulate me says, "whoa."

"Don't forget to call." Then she's gone disappearing in the writhing bodies.

Up in the DJ booth I look for her the rest of the night but her and that new couple are gone.

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The world is a peacefully place at 4am. I ride my bike home through the downtown streets and it's empty and silent, the street lamps highlight everything in shadowy contrast. All the bar fly's have crawled home to pass out or hover over toilets. There is the occasional car but not many at this hour in another 45 minutes the morning rush to work will start.

I'm not stupid I ride through areas that are well lit and I don't cut through the park or down alleys. I enjoy this time it's only a 12-minute ride home. Most night it's a rush at the bar other nights it's a drag. Normally I use these 12 minutes to come down and focus. Tonight, however, I think about lilacs. I think about the mystery woman, Anna, who just walked into my life and I think I know how this tale will end. Me clutching my broken heart in my hands looking for duct tape. I could lie and say all I want is sex, don't get me wrong I'm all for having sex. Unlike some folks - Jen- I have a hard time separating my heart and my clit where one goes the other is sure to follow.

I think about dancing with her. Pressed up against her feeling her heat, the softness of her skin and her strength when she would wrap her arms around me. She is the embodiment of strength made human; you can sense its all not just physical. Its her will, her personality, its just her; strength. I could lose myself in it and never come up for air. Being in her arms I could be kept safe from all things. That's a bit scary. I could lose myself too her and in her. That's not good.

I blink and I'm home. The porch light is on and I see Ed out smoking on it. I carry my bike up the steps and rest it on the railings.

"Hey." Ed says.

I love Ed we can hold a monosyllable conversation that would make primates jealous.

"Hey." I grunt back. Translation: give me a cigarette and matches.

He hands them over. While I try to light it, he says. "Hot night?" Translation: Sue and Rob said they saw you dancing with some hottie.

"Oh yeah." Translation: I nearly came on the dance floor and would willing give up freewill and smoking to be her love rhino.

"Cool." Translation: you the woman. Go Carmen.

"Cool." Translation: you better believe I'm the woman.

We spend another minute out on the porch. Ed gets up with a grunt and I follow bringing my bike inside.

Sleep is an elusive thing. My mind keeps working I think about Anna and the smell of lilacs. I wonder why I said I would call, but I did so I will. Call and do what? Its not like I can pick her up. I don't own a car. God, I am such a loser, "hey baby. Wanna go for a ride on my handle bars?"

Maybe we could meet downtown somewhere or maybe Kevin would let me borrow his car? I could take her up to Thompson's Grotto and we could hike around and do the picnic thing. I smile softly in the dark. That doesn't sound half bad. Kind of romantic in a half-assed way and I'm nothing if not half-assed. Clutching the pillow I let myself drift off.

Part 2

It's about 11:30 in the morning. I'm lying in bed, grasping the sheets in my hands while I clench my thighs together and sweat dots my forehead. I've had another dream - another very erotic dream. I think there may be a sixteen-year-old boy taking over my body. This is bad. I've never been affected by another person like this. I mean, sure I have my fantasies and things that get me

all hot and bothered, but this is different. This feeling is new and the intensity of it is a notch above what I thought myself capable of. And this is just the wet dreams. What happens when it's reality?

Groaning, I roll over and bury my head in the pillow. Perhaps I'll just stay in bed today. Grrr. No, I said I would call and I will¼ eventually. I'll just shower first so I can put it off for another 20 minutes.

Showered, dressed, and now to call. I twirl the business card in my fingers; it says, "Anna Russell. - Consultant," with some numbers. On the back is a local number with a room number below it.

'Call, Carmen, call. Call, Carmen, call,' the evil voice in my head chants. It just wants to get laid. Bad inner voice. Bad.

Okay, just make the call. She'll either be there or she won't, no big deal. The worst that can happen is that she'll realize her mistake and not want to see me. I hate that. Everyone says, "Go talk to her, Carmen. What's the worst that could happen, that she'll say 'no, thank you?'" Well, in my book rejection is pretty damn bad. Let's say you're at the bar and you see this hot woman across the room. Your mind wanders and you wonder could this if this could be the night you finally get lucky. Better yet, it could be more than just sex. She could be the one - the mythical eternal soulmate, the one who will complete you. Then you build up these expectations; even though you shouldn't, you do it anyways. So by the time you make it over to talk to her, she ends up looking at you like you're something on the bottom of her shoe. She pretends to be flattered but tells you 'no, thank you.' Then she'll want to know if the tall brunette sitting with you is available because it always ends up being about Jen.

I notice that this mental tangent has taken up a good five minutes. Go me.

Finally I pick up the phone and dial. It rings at the front desk and I ask for Room 612. I wait, wondering if I should just be proud I made it this far and hang up. As I'm getting ready to freak out on myself, a woman answers before I can finish my follow through and hang up.

"Hello?"

The voice is not Anna's. There's a strange woman, who is not Anna, answering the phone.

"Hello?"

"Um. Yes. Is Ms. Russell in?"

"No, Anna's out at the moment. May I take a message?"

"Uh, sure. Could you tell her that Carmen Webster called?"

"Of course, she's been expecting your call. I'll let her know when she gets in. Does she have your

number?"

I give it to her and we both go on our way.

Well, at least she was expecting my call. I wonder who the woman is that answered the phone? What if it's her girlfriend? What if this is some sort of kinky game they play luring innocent women into their clutches so they can do evil nasty things? Really, what do I know about this woman? Nothing. Well, that's not quite true; I know she's hot and she makes my libido do the happy dance. I will admit I'm a firm believer in that lust, love, and or whatever at first sight is bad. It prevents you from asking the important questions like, 'Is she an ax murderer?'

Crap, now what do I do with my day? Do I sit around wasting my afternoon waiting for a call that may or may not come? Ugh. Rob is poking me in the back of the head in a rather annoying fashion.

"Hey, geek. Why are you staring at the phone?"

"I'm staring cause 'cause I called a girl."

"A girl. A girl. Did you hear that, Sue? Our little girl is growing up so fast."

I shove him. Smartass.

"You go, Carmen. Was it that hottie you were dancing with at the bar?"

"Yes, it was the hottie I was dancing with."

"Oh man, she was stacked."

"Pig." I shove Rob again, only harder.

Sue turns from where she's looking at the mail and glares at Rob. "She was, was she?"

"Uh, did I¼ what I meant to say, um."

"You're sleeping on the couch." Sue winks my way to let me know she's not really all that upset before she storms off. Rob stares at me, then at in the direction that Sue stormed off.

"Guess it's time to run down to the store for whipped topping?"

"Guess so," he replies while stroking his goatee.

When Rob pisses Sue off, making up requires whipped topping. I really don't want to go into detail why I know this. Let's just say I came home early and have never been able to burn the memory out of my head.

Rob goes off in search of his wallet and I go off in search of something to do. I wander outside and find Ed coloring with chalk on the driveway.

"Hey."

"Hey."

I look down and see he's got the outline of a human form.

"Cool."

"Yep. I'm making me a Sistine Chapel, only with all chicks."

"You just want to draw boobies."

"Yep." He hands me some chalk and then goes back to work drawing God or now the well-endowed Goddess.

We watch in amusement as Rob runs out of the house.

"There goes a man on a mission."

"Whipped topping?"

"Uh huh."

"Hmmm?"

"You got a point, Ed. I should go grab my shoes and wallet before they really start going."

"Uh huh."

I run inside and then return to our feminized version of the Sistine Chapel on the driveway. As we work away in different colored chalk, we see Rob rush back, brown paper bag in hand. It only took him 14-minutes this time; he's been working out.

Ed and I continue to work, wrapped up in making the Goddess and Eve when until Sue comes outside wrapped in a sheet.

"Carmen, come get the damn phone and make it quick."

Shit! Anna! I totally forgot.

Dutifully I run into the house. "Hello."

"Carmen?"

Oh my goodness, what her voice does to me. I am yet again a puddle of naughty thoughts.

"Hey," I respond, being ever the witty one.

"I'm sorry if I called at a bad time. I hope your roommates aren't too upset with me."

"What? Oh that, don't worry about it. They've moved on to other things already." And they have. I can hear Rob's high-pitched wheeze. Ewww. *'Happy place. Happy place. I'm going to my happy place.'*

"Good. So you called me."

"Yep. Said I would." Fuck. It's become awkward. "Uh, so, would you like to get together and do something?" Go, Carmen. That was so lame.

"Doing¹/₄ something sounds like it has possibilities. What did you have in mind?"

Oh, oh, oh my God. Her voice has dropped down to a sexy purr and the sex fairies are doing the lust samba in my pants. Of course, it doesn't help that somewhere in the house Sue and Rob are having sex close to a vent. "I was thinking that maybe we could go for a hike and have a picnic, or something."

My suggestion is met with silence. "Or we could do something else." Stupid. Stupid. What if she hates the outdoors?

"No, that sounds sweet."

"Really? I mean great. I'll pick you up in like an hour."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Cool."

A rhythmic pounding has begun and I can only feel sorry for whatever piece of furniture is being used. I can feel my face turning red as I dial Kevin. "Kev, I need a favor."

I pull into the gravel and dirt parking area of Thompson's Grotto. Luckily I only see one other car parked up here, which means it's all ours. Even with spring almost here it's still cold in the mountains; the grotto is a little warmer and never gets any snow. In another two months this

place will be crawling with overnight campers on the weekends and underage kids having parties. I like the grotto; there are some nice trails to hike or bike on, and up a little ways past the parking area are some campsites. Nothing fancy, just some cleared dirt and some rocks setup in a ring for campfires.

I glance over at Anna. The 25-minute ride up has been really quiet. All I learned about her was that asking about her family was off limits, and that she was a consultant. However, what or whom she consults remains a mystery. Oh, and she's in my fair city on business, and whatever that business is, is no business of mine.

She does, however, look really good in jeans and a dark blue sweater, but this doesn't make up for the fact that she's been acting like a jerk ever since I picked her up.

"Well, we're here."

"It's charming." The way she says it implies the opposite.

My shoulders slump a little. This is one of my favorite places. I grumble to myself as I get out of Kevin's Jeep. As she gets out I can hear her boots crunch on the gravel.

"Would you like to walk around? Or if you're hungry, there's some tables over there we can eat at." Seeing the bored expression on her face, I deflate a little more. I'm such a dork. I can't even take someone out on a date right. "Look, you don't have to humor me. If you don't want to be here, just let me know and I'll take you back."

"What? No. It's great."

"No, it's not. You think it sucks. Just get back in the Jeep and I'll take you back." For some reason I'm really worked up and I can feel tears in my eyes. I just wanted a chance to get the girl for once. I might not be as suave, or attractive, or financially well off as Jen, Ashley, or my sister, but fuck, I'm an all right person. I have a big heart and, fuck it! why won't the key work in the door? My eyes burn and I blink rapidly to keep the tears from falling. There are hands touching me, rubbing up and down on my arms. Her voice tickles in my ear.

"Carmen. Carmen. Hey, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was acting all distant. Really, this is great."

Stopping my frantic stabbing of the key towards the lock, I look at her, noticing her sheepish expression. "Are you sure? Because I really don't want to make you do something you don't want to."

"No, this is fine. Really." She smiles and it's a genuine smile, not her predatory sexy smile. It makes her look young and I can't help but smile back.

"Okay then. Come on, there's a great trail over here. Just let me know if you get hungry. I brought a bunch of food and stuff."

She laughs as I pull her along to the trailhead.

"You're so cute. Almost like a little kid at Christmas."

I blush and duck my head. Hmmm¹/₄ not quite the effect I was going for, but I am feeling kind of hyper at the moment. I have this great buzz going through my body and I feel fantastic. How's that for an emotional roller coaster? I was about ready to burst in to into tears minutes ago and now I'm on top of the world.

As we hike along the trail, I point out various things to her and make her stop so she can take in the view. Way down below you can see my fair hometown; it looks so tiny and unimportant. As we hike and talk, I find myself moving beyond the lust stage that she has invoked in me into a scary murky area. I knew it. I knew I was incapable of keeping sex and love separate. Damn me! And we haven't even got to the sex part.

Anna seems more relaxed and I find this part of her even more beautiful and desirable than her predatory sex goddess persona.

"You must not be a big outdoors person," I state as she laughs at the antics of two squirrels.

"Well, living in New York City doesn't leave one with much appreciation of nature. I'd have to say I'm more of a city girl, but spending time with you out here is really nice.

"Thanks." I'm blushing again.

"You're so cute." She laughs and gives me a hug.

My brain's going into overload. I go with the moment. Maybe it's because of the erotic dreams I've been having about her, but I'm really aware of her breasts and how they feel all smooshed up against my body. I'm channeling that damn 16-year-old boy again. She steps back and I instantly miss her body. She has this strange expression on her face and I realize that she hasn't really moved all that far away. Is she going to kiss me? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe¹/₄ Oh, the tension. I'm afraid she'll kiss me and I'm afraid she won't. Finally, even though it's probably only been 10 seconds, I ask, "are you okay? You have a weird expression on your face."

"It's nothing. You're just so sweet."

"This is bad, how?" I'm feeling kind of defensive about this whole sweet thing.

"It's not, Carmen. It's wonderful."

Then she does kiss me. This takes me by surprise because I was under the impression that the moment had passed.

Her kiss is like a disease. It quickly infects my body and senses. My legs give out, knocking us both to the ground. Reality rocks! This is so much better than any dream. I want to touch her; so

far I haven't been very proactive about this whole kissing thing. My arm feels heavy, but I get it to move and I submerge my hand in her hair. It's wonderfully soft. I sink my hand in deep through her hair to the back of her neck. I stroke her neck, her shoulders, and move on to her back. I rub small circles there. Finally, after several civilizations have come and gone and eternity has fled, it ends.

I just lie there, not caring in the least little bit that the damp grass is soaking through my jeans. I just lie there with my eyes closed and a silly grin on my face, smelling the scent of lilacs. I can feel her hovering over me, and softly, like the breeze created by butterfly wings, I feel her finger touch my lips. She traces them and moves on to my jaw, up my cheek to my eyebrows.

"Carmen, was that okay? I mean, I wasn't planning on attacking you."

My grin just gets larger. "That was fabulous. Oh my God. I didn't know that a kiss could be that good."

Opening my eyes I see her blushing face, but her eyes, ¼ her eyes make me gulp. Such an innocent face with the eyes of a devil. A hand traces lines on my stomach and hip.

"You liked the first one. Maybe we should find out if it was a fluke?"

The words slink into my brain on velvet feet, which starts a dangerous chain reaction beginning with the sex fairies having a rave in my southern anatomy. My eyes snap open and I'm looking into her blue eyes. She's so close. This could be dangerous. I'm not sure I could survive another kiss. But what the hell, all those sex fairies in my pants couldn't be wrong.

There's a trick to open-mouth kissing. We're not talking gaping open-fish-mouths here. Not open enough to really want to get your tongue involved but not closed. No, not closed, uptight, 'I'm too fucking in control to loosen up' kisses. Just nice wet open mouth kissing, but there's a trick to it. I haven't got a clue what this trick is, but Anna does. It creates a simmer under my skin. She never speeds up; she sometimes slows down her kisses, making one linger longer than another. What really impresses me is the lack of drool; having you your mouth open for an extended period of time causes drool. Oh, you want a little bit of moisture or you don't get nice wet open mouth kisses.

She needs to have more of her body draped over mine. The sex fairies are unhappy about the lack of pelvic grinding area going on. Because if she would just swing that leg over and nestle it in between mine, it would give me something, oh so lovely to arch my body into. She is being such a tease. I can feel my breathing start to hitch a bit as her hand starts to do some lazy touching below the belt. My body feels like the Amazon, all hot and moist and teeming with life. I just want to grab her body and ¼

"Oh my God, are you all right!"

What the hell was that? Wait! Where are Anna's lips going? I'm seriously unhappy here and I think the sex fairies are building their own Death Star.

I blink, trying to find my way back to the here and now and out of my lust-induced reality. Anna is looking away and there's another person here. Oh, for the love of

"Are you two okay?" The same voice repeats again.

"I was until you" Anna stops my rather sexually frustrated comeback.

"We're fine. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Well, she's passed out on the ground and you're administering CPR."

"CPR! Oh for" I can't tell if I'm pissed off or amazed at his stupidity.

Anna beats me too to it.

"She's fine. We're fine. But you did rather rudely interrupt our make-out session."

"What? Oh I'm so sorry; I didn't realize. Oh my God, you're both dy, 1/4 lesb, 1/4 women."

"Yes, now why don't you file this away for some male masturbatory fantasy to use later, but please go now."

Nice. Anna just verbally kicked his ass all over the wilderness. Speaking of asses, my mine is rather cold and damp.

Anna just looks at me. "He's gone." She pauses. "The moment's gone too, isn't it?"

I sigh and nod. Stupid guy.

Grrr. My butt is all wet, and not in a good way mind you. I wouldn't mind so much if the only other person up here hadn't interrupted the smoochies. I mean, what are the chances of him coming across us making out? There are dozens of trails and he just has to use the one we're on. Of course I think we scared him as bad as he scared us. I glance at Anna out of the corner of my eye and I catch her doing the same to me. We just look at each other and bust up laughing.

Mmmm. Spontaneous kissage.

"You are so cute. I wasn't sure who was going to have the heart attack first, you or him."

I try glaring at her, but I'm too happy. My face muscles won't conform to the scowl I want to level her way. "It wasn't funny at all. He blundered into a perfectly good make-out session. And now all I have to show for it is a wet butt." I'm pouting.

She pulls me to her and nips my pouting lip, which makes me pout more. I thought we might be having more spontaneous kissage.

"So is your butt the only thing that's wet?"

I blush. She's such a naughty little vixen, but I love it. Maybe I should have 'Anna's love rhino' tattooed on my butt. "Hmmm¼. maybe."

She raises an eyebrow at my response. Yeah, color me surprised by my snappy somewhat-sexual comeback as well.

"Maybe?"

Whoops, somebody is much better at the sexual foreplay game than me.

Mmmmm. Hands in new places. I honestly can't remember the last time somebody grabbed my ass. Well, I guess she isn't so much grabbing it as fondling it.

"Maybe it's a secret."

"Guess I'll just have to search around and see what I find."

"I guess so." Okay, for the record, that was the sex fairies talking.

Mmmmm. Okay, hands are not in new places; my hands go there all the time. However, it's much better when her hands go there. There are advantages to having baggy jeans on. All she really had to do was get my belt undone and she could slip her hand right in. I swear to God if that stupid guy bumbles in on onto us again¼ "Oh sweet Jesus." Can I just mention again how much reality rocks?

"Yep, definitely wet."

I can't believe she just stopped and pulled her hand away. For crying out loud, me and that hand were becoming best buds.

"Wet and oh so yummy."

She is so trying to kill me with sexual frustration. She slides two fingers into her mouth and starts sucking them in a very erotic manner. Fine. I debate whether or not to just throw her on the ground and ravage her. I'm almost shocked by my thoughts; they seem far more assertive than the thoughts I normally have. Then again I haven't had sex in like 2 years. Ah, Nikki Watson. I had to jump out a window when her hubby came home so it's no wonder my sex drive went on a long vacation.

I push away from her and re-buckle my belt. My brown eyes meet meet her blue ones. "You suck," I say, as I start off again down the trail.

She laughs, "You have no idea how good I suck."

Grrr. Down, sex fairies, down.

"Where's that trail go?"

"It goes to the local high school party spot. The kids come up here and to camp and drink. They get to feel like they're getting away with something, but everybody knows what they're doing."

"Really? Did you come up here and get wild?"

I cough and look away. "Sometimes. Peer pressure and all that."

"I bet you were cute with your long curly hair and all dressed up."

"Ah¼" I just look at her. That's kind of creepy; that's exactly what I looked like. I wasn't always the tough bull dyke you see today. Okay, the words 'tough' and 'bull dyke' are stretching the truth a bit even now. However, in junior high and high school I was a real girl. I had long hair that I curled and I wore dresses almost all the time. In my defense I was two and a half years younger than everybody else. I was also scared most of the time, 'cause other than my intellect, I didn't really fit in. So I let my mother dictate what I was for a long time; it was nice to have someone in control of my life because so much of my life seemed out of control.

"That's freaky."

"What?" She blinks her blue eyes at me.

"That's pretty much me until my junior year. I was a big old geek."

"What happened your junior year?"

What didn't happen? My mind sheers sharply right to avoid thinking about anything from high school.

"I dunno. I think I just went into my teenage rebellion years."

"Did you wear a lot of black and listen to the Cure?"

"Uh, well, more like the Sex Pistols and The Ramones."

"I bet you were a cute punk rock girl."

"Actually I was an angry, confused child. If it hadn't been for my friends^{1/4}" I may seriously dislike Jen, Ashley, and my sister on occasion, but they were there for me when I need needed them, even if I didn't realize that I needed anybody. Of course, in a way I got into that place because of them.

"Hey, where did you go?"

"Uh, just remembering high school and wishing I wasn't." Okay, I think I just killed off all the sex fairies in my pants.

"I understand that."

"What? The sex fairies?"

She's looking at me very oddly. Oh shit! I said that out loud. "Man, am I starving! Why don't we go back down to the car and have a picnic?"

I start off down the trail, looking back to see if she's following, because I don't really want to see her face.

"So tell me about the sex fairies. Do they visit you often?"

My cheeks are turning pink. If she only knew how many visits I'd been getting from the sex fairies since I met her.

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"Um, could you not do that?"

"Do what?"

Her innocent blue eyes look at into mine. Trust me; what she was doing seconds ago was not that innocent. It was very indecent, verging on obscene.

"You know what you were doing."

"I was just sitting here eating my banana."

She was going down on her banana for crying out loud. I'll never be able to look at the fruit the same way again.

"There's another one. Do you want it?"

"Not really."

"Your loss. You know what bananas are good for, right?"

"They help prevent muscles from cramping."

"And¹/₄"

"I give. What else?"

"Boosting sex drive."

I'm so dead. Anna is going to kill me.

"So I'm dying to know."

She's got this evil look in her eye; I'm almost afraid to rise to the bait.

"Know what?"

"Did you ever come up here with anyone and make-out?"

"Not really. I was bumped up two grades so I was younger than everybody else. Who wants to make-out make out with a kid?"

"Not even once?"

I squirm, uncomfortable with the question. Truth was I came up here once; I didn't know it was to make-out, but it happened. It kept happening till until Jen and Olivia caught us. My memories don't go any farther; there's a black hole where they should be. I get a sense that something bad happened but I can't remember.

"Are you okay? You don't have to answer me if you don't want to."

"There was a person. They were 15 and I was 13. Jen caught us and it was over."

"Lucky guy."

"Not really."

"What happened to him?"

"It wasn't a him."

"Whoa! At 13 you knew you were gay?"

"No, I didn't. Can we talk about something else?"

I must have snapped at her; she's looking at me oddly. A headache begins to pound on at the back of my skull. I can vaguely remember what she looked like. She had blonde hair, blue eyes that remind me of Anna's, and braces. I remember not really wanting to kiss her but not really able to say no either.

"You don't look so good. Maybe we should go back."

"Yeah. Sorry, I'm just getting a headache."

"Hmmm, not quite the effect I was hoping for tonight."

"I have to work tonight but you're welcome to come by The Closet and hang out. Maybe we could go grab a cup of coffee after I get done."

"Only if you grab it with me back at my hotel room."

Okay, Carmen, be brave. For once in your life go for something you want. You want her, the sex fairies want her, and she even wants you. See? It's a win-win situation for all involved.

"I, well, um¼"

"You're so cute. I'm not sure I've seen a person blush as much as you." She comes forward and I don't have the good sense to back away. Her arms encircle my body, drawing us closer, and I imagine myself to be a moth. I am drawn to her fire even though I know it could be deadly. Her lips capture mine, and being the traitors that they are, they give up without a fight. We kiss until somehow she entices my lips to open and encourages my tongue to come out and play with hers.

Our tongues play hide and seek in each other's mouth until her lips trap my tongue and suck on it. A gentle suction, but it's one of those things that sets my brain on fire; the sex fairies are doing the hokey-pokey and ringing roses around my clit.

I push her away. "Stop now, please."

"I'm sorry; I thought. ¼"

"Oh no. Trust me, you thought right. I just¼ I just freak out on myself a lot when things get too intense."

God. What the hell am I doing? Things were going so well and then I had to go and remind her of what a dork I am.

"It's okay. I really want this, but I want it at a pace you're comfortable with."

I look up at her sheepishly.

"Honest."

"Okay." I decide to be brave and give her a quick kiss on the lips.

"Come on. Let's get me back so you can get ready for work."

I follow her back to the car, slightly surprised that she remembers the way. "You're a quick study."

She glances back with a saucy wink. "You have no idea."

You put one sex fairy in, you put one sex fairy out, you put one sex fairy in and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around and that's what it's all about.

The Jeep is idling outside her hotel. "So this is your stop."

"Yes, it is."

"So I'll see you later?" It comes out as a desperate question.

"Oh yeah, we have a date later."

"Good."

I'm staring at her and she's staring at me; the air is all expectant and heavy. Should I lean over and kiss her? Should I just wait and see what she does? Screw it. I'm going in.

"Carmen^{1/4}"

Hold that thought. "Yeah?"

"I really am beginning to like you."

"Uh^{1/4} okay." That wasn't what I was expecting.

"But you should know I'm here on business. I'm not staying."

Well fine. Just go and burst my balloon. I can feel myself deflate at her words.

"But I thought I should be upfront about this whole thing."

She does look really upset. I should say something. Gah, come on, brain, work.

"You don't have to say anything."

"No. Anna. I know that you're not staying, but I like you too. So let's just have fun with this until you have to go and then we'll see. Okay?" I am such a liar. This crap from the person who was going to have 'Anna's love rhino' tattooed on their ass. Sure, I can do non-threatening fuck buddy. Grrr¼ I am such a loser. When I do manage to find a girl, she's not even from this state.

"Okay, I just thought we should be honest before this went any farther."

"I appreciate that." Mmmmmm, ¼ more spontaneous kissage in front of the hotel. What were we talking about? Right - love rhino. Screw later, I'm going up now for more kisses, maybe followed by naughty touching.

Suddenly the car lurches forward. For the love of¼ I look over to see if Anna is okay, and then I get out. Just in time to see a large man getting out of jacked-up truck. Looking at the back of the Jeep, I see that the two vehicles are kissing bumpers.

"Jesus," I mumble.

"You got a problem?" The large man growls.

Do I have a problem? You bet your pumped-up ass I have a problem. However, when I say it out loud it comes out more like, "No." I'm no superhero, and it won't do me any good to get bent out of shape.

"Where the hell did you learn how to drive, meathead? Not only did you hit my friend's car, you managed to hit a parked car. It wasn't even a moving target."

I'm utterly amazed as Anna verbally grinds the man under her boot, and, I have to admit, a little turned on. Apparently I like assertive women. This guy is seriously about ready to kiss the ground she walks on.

Stunned she hands me his insurance and registration information. "So, later tonight. You're mine. Right?"

I just nod. I'm so hers tonight.

"What happened to my baby?"

I roll my eyes. Kevin has this sixth-sense about his Jeep. Some gay men get hyped up about clothing and decorating; Kev has his Jeep.

"Some over-pumped muscle-head rear ended me. You can barely even see where they kissed bumpers."

"Barely see? Barely see?" His voice rises and cracks in distress. "It looks like a fucking crater on the moon. It's huge."

Oh for¼ he's on his knees spitting at the faint crease in the bumper and trying to buff it out with his shirt. "Kev, come on now. They have professionals for that."

"This is the last time I let you borrow my Jeep."

"Jeez, Kev, it's just one little scratch. Could you overreact more?"

He looks at me then flings himself on the ground, failing his limbs, screaming that I wounded his baby. Okay, I was wrong; he could overreact more.

He gets up with a grin. "How was that?"

"The academy called. Your award is ready."

"I knew I missed my calling."

"What is your calling exactly?"

"Spoiled rich gay boy."

"Oh, so you're gay this week?"

"I think so. I've gone the whole month without going to church or the confessional."

"Good gay boy." I pat his head. "Any reason for this religious sabbatical?"

"Oh yeah. Sex with girls is alright but it can't compare to a man's mouth wrapped around my¼"

I cut him off. "Stop. Just stop that sentence before it goes to too far."

He grins and says, "Cock."

"Oh my God, you just had to go there. I didn't need to know that. I mean, happy dance that you had sex and all, but now I need disinfectant for my brain."

He continues to grin at me.

"Ewww. It was Jeff, wasn't it?"

His grin just gets bigger. "He's like a vacuum."

"Let me repeat. - ewww. Like that imagery was remotely sexy. Do you frequently get friendly with your cleaning appliances?"

"Blah Blah blah. You're just torqued 'cause I got some and you didn't."

"Well, I'm getting some tonight. So there." Yes, I do follow this really childish reaction by sticking my tongue out at him.

"This would explain why your butt is all wet."

"Come here, Kev. I feel the need to beat you up." He takes off running and I follow quickly after him. At least he's forgotten about the scratch on his bumper.

I pull my waterlogged body out of Kevin's pool. I almost had him. I think that elementary school incident where I beat him up affected his self-image. The boy started running and lifting weights after that. Of course he never grew to be over 5'7" either. I think Kev's estranged father may have died and willed him a bunch of money, but as far as I know, Kevin doesn't have a job that pays for the kind of life he has. He's a personal trainer at the local gym. Not the kind of job that pays for a nice two-bedroom home with a pool and hot tub.

"Looks like I got you way wetter than Ms. Russell did."

I spit water at him. "Not everything has to have a sexual connotation."

"Hey, you're the sick person who took it as a sexual reference."

Lying on the nice soft marble that surrounds the pool, I look up at the darkening sky. "Kev, she's not staying. She's just here on business."

He throws me a towel. "So it sounds like the perfect relationship to get you back in the dating saddle. No fuss, no muss. Just exchange some fluid and go your separate ways."

"Kevin, you realize you really have no room to be coaching me on the ins and outs of sex and dating."

"Yeah, but I thought I should be a good friend and try."

With a laugh I get up. "Yeah, and I love you for trying."

He gives me a hug and leads me into the house. "Too bad we can't both be straight. It would have solved a lot of our problems."

I smile but don't say anything. He says that a lot. Sometimes I think he really wishes it were true, but I can't imagine being any other way.

Part 3

Disclaimer - Oh my God! There be sex in this part. If sex between women bothers you -- How the hell did you get this far into my story? Really I'm curious.

Oh my God! I'm going to have sex. I have to sit on my bed and tuck my head between my knees. Kevin brought me home an hour ago and so far I've been trying to figure out what to wear. However, the thought of Anna's sexual promise of "coffee" later keeps banging against the inside of my mind every 2.5 seconds. I was going to get some tonight and now I'm almost hyperventilating. This is kind of, well, sex is not my greatest strength in the 'attract a mate' category. I mean it can't be. In fact I'm fairly certain I'm the world's worst lover. If I was any good at all then I wouldn't lose my girlfriends to Jen. All she offers them is sex so that has to be what I'm lacking. I think I heard my ego whimpering.

Deep breaths one after another, the floor is a lot closer when your head is between your knees.

"Hey."

"Jesus." I look up the room blurring around the edges a bit. I see Ed looking at me with a worried look on his face. Normally his face is really neutral, but when he gets worried his mouth purses up just a bit and shifts to the right. He has a glass of water in his hand, bless that boy. I haven't got a clue why he's single he's the sweetest thing, it's probably that quirky non-talkative side that keeps them away.

Ed sits next to me on the bed and silently hands me the water. "Better?" Which translates to: saw you freaking, thought you could use some fluids.

I don't say anything a just sip the water and try to organize my thoughts.

"It's cool." He whispers patting my back. Translation: you really don't need to talk about it if you don't want.

"Thanks. It's just. You know^{1/4}"

"Ahhh." Translation: it's about sex.

Yes Eddie knows me well, if I fumble for words the subject must be about sex.

He smiles, "The key is communication."

I'm floored. Ed used a whole sentence I'm fairly certain there was punctuation and everything.

"If you're scared or uncertain, its not right. Don't push the moment, but don't let fear motivate you."

I am speechless, utterly speechless. "Ah, you, with a period at the end and everything."

"Yeah." He ducks his head. Then he hugs me and gets up to leave.

"You're the best Ed."

"Yep." Translation: I am the Master of Love.

It's the quiet ones I'm telling you.

I take some more deep breaths and then turn my attention back to more important matters, my selected plumage for the evening so I can attract my mate. Maybe black, black is a good all purpose color made to make one look elegant in any occasion, like, yes lets go have coffee back at your hotel room. Wink, wink. Nudge, nudge. Unfortunately my skin is too pale I just look like some Goth wannabe, so black is out. Jeans are always good or maybe kakis, oh for, I just don't know.

"What's the problem? Is there a spider in your underwear drawer?"

"Wha?" I turn to see Sue standing in the doorway. Apparently its check in on Carmen night. "No, I would have been screaming and cowering on my chair."

"So no spider I take it. What's the quandary?"

"I don't know what to wear?"

"And this is a problem how? Wear what you normally do to DJ."

"I." I clear my throat. "Its like this¼ um, well, I have a date after work."

"You have a date?"

There was clearly a tone of incredulousness in that statement. I turn and glare at her.

"I mean¼ Wow, you have a date. When was the last time that happened?"

"Two years ago, Nikki Watson."

"Oh right. She had a husband and you dove out the window. Good thing there were bushes there to break your fall."

I give a shudder remembering that night. She had driven us from the bar to her place, so I was walking the five miles home with no shoes and holding my pants up. Olivia was too stoned to pick me up; out of options I called Jen to pick me up. Trust me I was very surprised when she came and got me. She never said anything just told me I was lucky yet again that she was there to bail my ass out. Yeah she really pisses me off sometimes. So I brought up the prank against the Alpha Chi Omega's that got me kicked out of college. Let's just say it involved lots of honey, Tabasco, and a few rats. To make a long story short when the cops showed up they told me to run a decoy because I was the fastest. Being the running man doesn't work if you trip over a sprinkler head in the dark and sprain your ankle. Olivia, Ashley and Jen didn't even show up to my hearing. Jen's dad did work his mojo and got the charges dropped so I was only suspended for a semester, but after a semester off I didn't really want to go back.

"Is it fun where you went?"

"Oh sorry big involved flashback scene in my head about Nikki, Jen and the semester I got kicked out."

"That was quite the involved one."

"Uh, yeah. So I have a date."

"Yes and you're having dressing issues. What are you going for?"

"Uh, clothed."

"No silly. Do you want to look sexy, fun, serious, or a combination."

"Uh, I don't want to look like a club kid I want her to take me seriously."

"Oh honey. She's attracted to the person she met, she's not going to be impressed with the woman you try to create out of these clothes."

"But I'm a dork."

"Sometimes I wish I had the guts to strangle those so called friends of yours. But honestly Ashley and Jen scare me. Carmen you are a lovely, very intelligent girl, you have so much to give to that special someone, but something inside of you fails to see it."

I blush and duck my head. Sue is well, biased I'm sure, but my ego sure feels better.

"So how about the kaki's with the light blue "Getting Lucky in Kentucky shirt"? I like that one the cotton is so soft so if you snuggle you'll get bonus points."

"I love it when you use video game talk Sue, it just gets me so hot and bothered." Oh yeah, and the visual I got about snuggling with Anna made the sex fairies sit up and take notice. They been oddly quiet since I got off the mountain, but now they're all sorts of perky.

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Ugh, it just blows tonight. Was there a gay couples meeting tonight? I have had request after request for slow, cheesy love ballads. I just want to puke, sure I'm making good tips but still there's only so much horror ones psyche should have to deal with. Now if I was hopelessly in love with some fabulous woman then I probably would feel the love in these songs, but right now they make me ill. Okay, I used the word fabulous in a sentence I have been spending way too much time with the gay boys.

Nervously my eyes dart over the club again, still no Anna. It's only Midnight so no need to worry yet. Although she's probably changed her mind her and that mystery woman who answered her phone earlier at her hotel room are having a good laugh, and I wore the soft snuggle shirt. I'm so over the top here its not even funny, I mentally slap my face and get my thoughts back on track.

I'm trying to decide if I should be mean or not on the next song. I could play some hard techno and piss everyone off or play the YMCA that the really drunk group of straight girls keeps begging me to play. One even went so far as to promise me a kiss if I would play her song. Yeah, yeah just what every lesbian wants, to get her toaster oven. Actually I don't harbor any fantasies about converting a straight girl. The last thing I want is some drunk ass kiss from a girl whose going to freak out on herself five minutes later. Plus straight girls don't know how to kiss another girl. They're automatically trying to kiss you like you are some guy, but guys are hard with sandpaper like facial hair. While girls are soft even the hard core butch ones. The give and take is different, not many guys know that a good kissing session can rank right up there with sex. To most guys kissing is just a way to get sex. So the approach is totally different. I will admit the last time I kissed a guy was on a dare at some party my first week of college I can only hope for the straight women in the world that they get more trainable as they get older.

So why would I want to kiss a straight girl when I could kiss an already trained lesbian?

Fine, I'll play the Village People, YMCA here we come.

Okay, I'm not sure what surprises me more. The fact that the girl came up and followed through with her tip or the fact she knows how to kiss another woman. She smiles at me shyly and winks as she goes on to the dance floor with the rest of her friends. The sex fairies are doing the Macarena, which is so annoying, and I'm really starting to feel like I've been stood up.

"Hey Dork."

I look up from the CD racks to the golden eyes of my sister. "Who died?" I know, it's an awful first response, but it was the first thing that came to my head. Olivia never comes to see me at work, and she never comes to The Closet on a Friday and Saturday.

She blinks at me, "no one."

"Then why are you here?"

"When are you going to get a damn cell phone?"

I slam the CD into the player, "What would I need a cell phone for? I'm not that hard to find."

"What if you fell off your bike on the mountain and busted a leg? Who would know?"

"That's why I never go biking alone."

"Mom's been trying to get a hold of you all day. Where have you been?"

"If you must know I had a date. I took her up to Thompson's Grotto for the day."

Olivia just rolls her eyes at me. "Right. You don't date."

"Well, I would, but, oh, somebody keeps stealing all my girlfriends." I can feel the vein in the center of my forehead starting to pulse.

"Well if you would find a decent girl who wouldn't bed hop you wouldn't have that problem."

"So, it's all my fault. Oh, that's right the HIGH AND MIGHTY MS. BRIDGEWATER CAN NEVER BE WRONG!" I am not going to look around, because I'm sure if I do I will see every eye in the place focused on me.

"I didn't come here to fight with you." She says with a sigh.

"Then why are you here fighting with me?"

"We aren't fighting, yet."

I just look at her, "Olivia, just tell me what you want. I'm working here. I don't bug you while you're at work." I can see she's trying really hard not to roll her eyes and sneer at what I consider to be work.

"Tomorrow mom is having a family dinner night. She wants us all to be there."

I feel myself pale and Olivia shakes her head in understanding. Family dinner night is nothing short of hell on earth. Our mother seems to be under some misguided notion that it promotes

unity and some sort of well being, when in actuality it causes ulcers and anal leakage.

My real dad ran off with one of his secretaries when I was 5, and when I was 12 mom remarried Justin Meyer. As step-dads go he's a good one, he tries really hard to be a father figure, which is more than I can say about Mathew, my real dad. Once mom remarried he stopped sending child support checks, those were the only things he sent to us. No birthday or Christmas cards, no gifts, nothing. I once asked mom if she was hiding the gifts our dad was sending so we would hate him more. She just looked at me sadly and I knew she wasn't doing anything; our biological dad was just a big loser. Justin made up for a lot of the failings made legendary by Mathew. The best memory I have of him was when I came out to my family. While mom was turning red in the face and swearing at me in Spanish, which I knew meant that she was really pissed. He just looked at me in his own startled way and said, "being a lesbian fits you." Also when mom was going through her phase where I didn't exist he tried to have the 'birds and the birds' talk. He wanted to make sure that I was being safe when I had sex and I quote the man. "Carmen, even though the stats say the risk of getting diseases is low when two, uh, women, uh, you know. You can still transmit diseases so you still need to be careful. This is a dental dam¹/₄" I was about ready to die and poor Justin I thought his head might explode. I was mortified and wouldn't talk to the man for months, but now I think he was incredibly sweet to even try. How many step-dads would do that for a kid that's not really their own?

The man's only real big failing is his two sisters' they are two of the biggest bitches on the face of the planet - if you look up bitch on the Internet and they have their own web pages dedicated to them. Janet and Karen Meyer are married to two over-achieving scumbags and have managed to both produce from their loins two children each who are equally as annoying and pompous as they are. Thankfully they live an hour away.

However, family dinner nights consist of Justin's sisters and their brood as well as Grandma and Grandpa Cortez. My Grandparents are Argentinean-American, and they are quiet disappointed that Olivia and I are unmarried they refuse to remember that we are lesbians, and they are also perpetually unhappy that other than our dark hair and eyes we look white cause mama went and done it with a white-boy, and they hate the fact I could never pick up any Spanish what so ever. When it comes to foreign languages I am tone deaf. I almost starved to death when I was 8 over at their house cause Grandma said I couldn't have anything to eat until I asked for it in Spanish. I'm so bad I don't even know the cool swear words that even the whitest of Americans' knows.

So tomorrow mom wants us all over for a family dinner night.

I look at Olivia, "I don't suppose there's anyway I could flee the country and get out of it."

She snorts, "She'll track you down to the ends of the earth if you don't show up."

"I know. Are the demons coming?"

"As far as I know."

I grumble as I mix into another song.

"You know maybe you should bring your date. That's if she really exists."

I pale at this. "Don't even go there. Do you remember what happened that last time I brought a date?"

Olivia snorts in laughter. Ha ha, she can laugh it up 'cause she's smart she never brings her dates around the house. The one and only time I did that Chris ran screaming from the house because Grandma Cortez thought that she was possessed by the Devil and tried to perform an exorcism on the poor girl. However, I have to say that Olivia's mocking of my dating abilities has me pissed. "Maybe I will. And won't you be surprised at the hot redhead that comes to dinner on my arm."

She rolls her eyes, "Whatever. When I see it I'll believe it."

"Get out of here. Don't you have a public sex demonstration to give at the Castle?"

"Ha ha. See you later dork! Don't be late and don't forget you date." She says with a snicker as she leaves the DJ booth.

I sigh as I stare at the Budweiser clock. Its 20 minutes until closing, and I'm fairly certain that I am not getting lucky tonight. Which is a happy and sad thought all rolled up together. The sex fairies are pouting I think they were fairly certain that they would be moving on to a higher plane of existence after this evening's activities. The pressure of sex is a fleeting memory, which makes me way more relaxed, but the fact that I've been stood up makes me unhappy. To top it off I have family dinner night tomorrow its almost enough to break a girl's heart.

We hit last call and I'm at a point of non-caring. The music has become angry and hard, causing what little patrons that there are to flee. I can feel Jeff staring at me concerned from the bar, but I refuse to acknowledge him. I so don't want the gay boy pep talk at the moment.

"Excuse me."

"Yeah." It comes out rude and harsh. Turning I see the straight girl from earlier.

"Um!" she's a little taken aback and pauses to re-group her thoughts. "I was wondering if you wanted to join my friends and I up at the truck stop for coffee when you get off work."

I can feel my eyes blinking rapidly in surprise while my mind tries to come up with a reply. Maybe I was wrong; maybe she's not straight? Could she be hitting on me?

"I'm supposed to meet someone after work." There's a flicker in her eye, I swear it looks like disappointment. "But if it falls through I'll come up and see if you girls are still there." She gives me a big grin and I feel like I've saved the universe.

"My name is April."

"Carmen."

"It's nice to meet you."

"Uh¼ same here. The kiss was a nice tip." I add that last part to be cocky and test the waters.

She blushes, "I'm glad."

As she turns to leave I call out. "If I don't make it I'm here every Friday and Saturday night. Come back and see me April."

She turns back to me smiling, "we'll see." And then the little tart winks at me.

Women, if I ever figure them out I'll write a book and be wealthy.

I've given into the mindset of defeat Anna is not coming. The bar is closed and I'm outside unlocking my bike. All that is left to figure out is if it is worth it to bike all the way out to the truck stop. My insides are slowly going numb, my libido is packing its bags to take another vacation far away from here and the sex fairies are starting to slip into hibernation. I hate this town. Once I thought of escaping, up to Seattle or down to the coast of California to be a bum on the beach. I find myself entertaining these thoughts again.

"Hey sexy."

Startled I whip around brandishing the bike lock as a weapon. It's just Anna.

Just Anna, just fucking Anna, who made me feel like a loser, who gave me the impression that I had been stood up, yep, just Anna.

"Ready to go have some coffee."

"I thought you had stood me up." I get my bike out slipping the bike lock into its holder.

"I'm sorry. I had some last minute business to take care of. I thought it would be resolved in plenty of time for me to get down here. As I you can see I barely made it."

"Could have called." It comes out all pouty.

She smiles. "I should have called, your right, and I'm sorry if I worried you."

I think I'm forgiving her. "Yeah, I think I'm ready for coffee." I give a small smile.

There's no room for my bike in her rental car, I leave it with one of the bouncers to lock up inside the bar. I slide into the Benz, the leather seat crackling as I put weight on it. The first thing I notice is she smells good. The next thing I notice is that she looks good. She looks professional

in a tailored business suit it has to be tailored. It fits her too perfect not to be. It gives hints and accusations about her womanly curves, tailored to hide and tease about the woman under the suit.

The sex fairies are stirring wiping sleep from their eyes; I can feel their wings begin to flap causing an internal fire to spark and flare up. She hasn't really looked at me since we started driving and in a brief moment of panic I wonder if we really are going to have coffee. The sex fairies want me to steal a kiss, and maybe the quick grope of a thigh. Would that be okay? Should I or should I follow her lead?

I lean over slowly, we aren't touching, and I can see her eyes flicker over to me then back to the road. I inhale slowly through my nose, and her scent flows in on the air. Into my nose, down into my lungs, and I hold it there for a moment pretending that the blood cells are making the exchange of carbon-monoxide for oxygen laced with Anna's scent. They carry it deep to every tissue and organ inside my body apart of her is inside me combined deeply with me. I exhale through my mouth, inhaling again I lean over farther not even half an inch away from her now. Her eyes flicker to me again then back to the road.

"You're killing me with anticipation. Is this revenge for me being late?"

That's all I need to know, anticipation implies she wants me to do something, that something I'm going to take is me, nuzzling her neck and maybe nibbling on her ear.

"No, no revenge." I whisper against her skin as I move closer. "This is just cause I want to and I'm feeling brave and very much not like myself at the moment so just humor me."

"Okay." She squeaks out as I nuzzle her neck giving it a lick and a kiss I move up slowly to her ear. I breathe out softly onto her ear smiling as I feel a small shudder go through her body I take the lobe firmly in my teeth and follow with my lips drawing it into my mouth. As I feel the car swerve I release her not wanting to cause an accident.

I chuckle a bit feeling empowered, "You're speeding."

"I don't care."

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I thought there might actually be coffee involved with this night of seduction. I was wrong. I mean our brains may have been okay with coffee and more getting to know you time but the body had other plans. If you deny the physical too long your body steps in to remedy the problem. My skin wanted to be caressed and stroked. My lips wanted to be kissed and nibbled. My nerves wanted to be firing off good happy messages of euphoria to all other parts of my body

that were missing out on direct stimulation. Once we entered the suite my body staged a coup over my mind, I think it was egged on by the sex fairies. I'm not sure what came over me. The sex fairies were doing the lambada and I had Anna pushed into the wall as I kicked the door shut with my foot. I need to taste her lips, her throat, and her skin that taunts me peaking out from gray-blue fabric. There are so many buttons; I'm not that out of control that I rip it open even though I really, really want to. I read about someone doing that in one of those cheesy lesbo romance novels and it just sounded cool, but I'm sure if I did that with Anna's expensive suit she'd kill me.

"God with a mouth like that how can you possible be single?" It's whispered low and breathy.

It sends chills up my body and not good chills, creepy chills. I break away in the murky darkness all I can really see in the shadow light from the window are her eyes her blue eyes that remind me of someone else, someplace else. Echoes in my head of another girl's voice from years ago. She repeats a similar phrase over and over again it reverberates inside my mind, "with a mouth like that you'll never be single." White pain burns through my head it threatens to take me away and shuttle me to the past. *The past is a blonde haired girl, with blue eyes, and a cocky smile.* "Heidi." *She's standing on the edge of the earth and then she just falls away. No more blonde hair, no more blue eyes and no more cocky smile. Its all bathed in red and colored in pain.* My stomach heaves and I vomit on Anna's shoes.

Just shoot me now I'm sure Anna's shoes are worth more than me. My head aches and I just want to scurry away and hide. The damn sex fairies get to hide and it's their fault I'm in this mess. I wait not willing to look up, not willing to move at all, maybe I'll give up that whole breathing thing all together, that way I can die and just fade away, and not have to deal with the humiliating situation that I have gotten myself into.

"Whose Heidi?"

"What?" That wasn't what I was expecting at all.

"Heidi. Who is Heidi?"

My head whips up to look at her, which was a bad move. Ugh more pain, followed by dizziness. A voice that vaguely sounds like Scotty from Star Trek goes through my mind. "She can't take no more Captain. She's going down." And down I go ass over teakettle on to the nice plush carpeting. I don't want to deal with reality so I let the blackness come without a fight.

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I'm standing in the grassy landscape of the grotto. Heidi and I are just standing watching the sunset. In the distance in the trees we can hear the high school kids in full party mode.

"So how are things?" I ask.

"You know same old, same old. When you die nothing much changes."

"Yeah about that whole dying thing. I'm sorry."

"Why? It's not like you killed me¼ oh wait you did."

I flinch but it's deserved.

"I didn't kill you. You committed suicide remember. You jumped right off these very rocks. Left a note and everything."

"Right, the school tough who couldn't even spell her name right left a pristine handcrafted note with perfect spelling."

I have no response to that. "Um¼ I didn't kill you."

"You, your friends what's the difference."

"Nobody killed you! You fucking off'd yourself! Why the hell would I want to kiss¼ fuck, I meant why the hell would I want to kill you?"

She laughs. It's that fucking self-assured the world is always going to go my way laugh. "Yeah that pretty little mouth of yours. Its quite the weapon, I know I could never stay away from it, it always had me coming back for more. On the other hand an artist should appreciate their work, and I made you a work of art baby, taught you how to kiss and the whole nine yards."

"Yeah they have a term for that, child abuse."

"Yeah well they have a term for what you did to me its called murder."

"I don't remember killing you. I think I would remember that."

"Not yet but you will in time. Your mind is growing up and soon it will give up its secrets like a bride on her wedding night."

She blows me a kiss and that's it that's the last fucking straw. Screaming I charge her only to fall over the damn cliff into darkness.

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Voices are talking; they fade in out of the safe dark place that I'm floating in.

"Anna. Is revenge worth the games you're playing with this girl?"

"You know growing up, I had classes with her up until the 3rd grade then she tested out and moved up to the 5th grade with her sister and those friends. She was so smart everyone was so sure she was going to find the cure for the common cold or something. Then in high school she starts tutoring my sister and the next thing I know my sister is gone. Those bitches took my sister away from me. I will find out what happened that night, and she knows, she was there."

"Did you try just asking?"

"They ruined my family and my life. I'm going to return the favor."

"Right. You have a college education, and a cushy job were you rake in cash. This kid doesn't even own a car; she works two jobs and barely gets by. Oh yeah Anna, your life just sucks."

"What the hell is wrong with her?"

"I'm guessing you triggered something. I have nothing in my report on her to suggest any childhood trauma. What were you two doing?"

"We were getting cozy."

"How cozy?"

"Well she was taking the lead in a rather aggressive make-out session and the mouth on that girl my god I have never been kissed so thoroughly in my whole life I was about ready to come from just that and then she was puking on my shoes."

"I don't know what happened."

"Some help you are Jordan."

"Sorry."

"Fine, help me move her to the bed."

What's going on? I try to remember to hold on to what they were saying because something tells me its important, but everything fades back into darkness.

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I sit up with a start. Vaguely I notice a sheet slipping down my body. The inside of my mouth tastes like shit and I have a slight headache that is fading away. What really gets my attention is the fact I have no idea where I am. This isn't my room, and all I am wearing is my t-shirt and my panties. My pants seem to have run off with my shoes and socks to have some affair.

I stumble out of the bed; the fact that it is high off the ground compared to my own mattress on the floor causes me a brief moment of trouble. I make my way to the drapes, I slowly inch them back to look out. Morning is just beginning to break through the darkness turning everything from black to gray.

"Hey you're up."

The voice is raspy and slightly sexy. I turn and notice Anna sitting up in the bed I just exited. How the hell did I not notice she was there? Oh, my she's kind of on the naked side of clothed. Did we? Was it good? My bell really must have gotten rung.

"Uh, yeah, I up."

"Come back to bed it's early."

"Um¼ in a minute I'd like to find a bathroom first." *And get rid of whatever died in my mouth.*

"Okay. Hurry back to bed." She mutters as she flops back down and snuggles under the covers.

I stagger around until I find the bathroom, it wasn't that hard to find out of the two doors to choose from. Happily I see there is some liquid blue mouthwash just sitting by to aid in my emergency halitosis, and even better is the safety sealed never been opened toothbrush sitting next to it.

As I brush my teeth I try to picture what happened last night, she was still in bed with me so I couldn't have been half bad. However, I figure I would be a little sore in my nether region if we had done some sweaty horizontal grindage. Gargling it comes back to me the whole puking on her shoes and I almost choke to death - but it would have been a minty fresh death.

"Jeez, I can't believe she still let me stay the night let alone get in her bed after puking on her shoes." I mumble to myself.

Slinking back into the bedroom I stare at the shock on red hair visible above the covers. *Maybe I should just find the rest of my clothes and get the hell out of here before I do some more damage.* Suddenly the covers are whipped back and a sleepy voice mumbles, "Stop staring and get the hell back in bed."

Slowly I lower myself back into the bed and cover up. I give a small squeak as a naked leg is thrown over mine and then I'm being used as a pillow. Dear God there is so much flesh-to-flesh

contact going on here. The sex fairies perk right up and start their morning exercises, little bastards.

I can clearly identify that those are breasts pressed into my back, and well, someone's a little aroused this morning if the wetness I feel on the back of thigh is what I think it is. If it isn't I'm so out of this bed.

"Um¼ Anna you awake."

"Uh huh."

"Good I just wanted to apologize for last night."

"It's okay. I was really worried about you. I'm not use to that sort of reaction when I make out with somebody."

I blush, "well I really liked what we were doing. I think it was just nerves."

"So who is Heidi? You know most women might get a little ticked off having another woman's name come up when in the midst of a really great kissing session."

I squirm around uncomfortably, but she's not budging in fact her body seems to cling even more to me.

"Heidi was some girl I tutored in high school, um, she killed herself up at the grotto."

"I'm so sorry, but wigged that it popped into your head while we where kissing."

"It was your eyes, there almost the same shade hers were. I don't know why she popped into my head, I haven't thought about it in years."

"It must have been tragic for you, to witness that sort of thing."

"I don't remember it, they say I was there, but it's a big blank spot in my memory." The headache that was going away is coming back.

"Shhh. It's okay." She whispers kissing my neck. "Let's talk about something else okay."

Her kisses feel good, and I suddenly don't want to talk about death anymore. I roll over on to my back and tug her on top of me. "Why don't we talk about coffee?"

She complies and settles her glorious naked weight on top of me. "Coffee? Oh, coffee."

I'm so glad she's following me here. "Someone is a morning sex person." I whisper as I tangle my hands in her hair and pull her down so I can kiss her lips. She wiggles her hips and I groan as the warm wetness smears on the exposed skin on my stomach where my shirt has ridden up.

"Nothing wrong with a little sex to jump start ones day."

I have to agree with her on that. She's got my tongue again and is sucking on it. God, that causes a shock to travel all the way down my body to my clit. I don't know why I like that so much but it's a big turn on for me.

The sex fairies have started a toga party and are all chanting and doing beer bongs.

We come together like pieces of clay being molded together, we join and clash, tumble and turn, sink into and out of each other.

"Someone is wearing to much." She breaks away and we pause a moment panting. Then she turns around mooning me, and grasps my underwear firmly thrusting it down my body.

I struggle to get my shirt off, fuck Kentucky I'm getting lucky here and now, but damn her ass is distracting. It's all firm and round with that rosebud red puckered opening staring me right in the face. I've never really been a butt woman. Sure if I'm having a rough sex fantasy I think about some hot mystery woman, a strap-on and fucking her up the ass, but I don't have those a lot. Normally I have a thing for lips. I like a woman with nice full kissable lips. I fantasize for hours about just kissing women and sooner or later one pair of lips becomes another pair only lower on the anatomy chart.

However, there's just something about her ass. Maybe its cause it's right there, sitting in front of me teasing me. I get my shirt off and lie back on the bed. She leans forward the muscles in her back going taunt as she tries to get my underwear off over my feet. Unable to resist I run my fingers over her back letting my nails leave parallel red lines. When I get to the muscles in her butt I dig in deep giving my own evil chuckle as she gives a shudder and a moan. She seems to like it, if the renewed wetness I feel is any indication. I lean up on an arm letting my other hand move around to her front and explore that wetness. I drag a finger back and forth, until I feel her hips buck. Then I bring it back around, letting that lone, wet, little finger circle around the rim of that rosebud red opening.

She stills and so do I. Maybe I went to far? I know some folks aren't up for this sort of thing, and I haven't really done what I'm doing before. I've only read about it in books. Suddenly, I'm a little embarrassed by my bold behavior and I quickly remove my hand and lay back down throwing a pillow over my head to hide my face.

She moves around, and through the pillow I can feel her staring at me.

"Carmen?"

"I'm sorry." I mumble over and over again into the pillow. "I'm such a dork."

"I can't hear you. You wanna come out from under the pillow."

I shake my head in the negative. I feel her chuckle.

"Okay. More fun for me."

A warm wet tongue licks the underside of one of my breasts causing me to jump. Then it moves on to the other one. That tongue keeps working, tracing wet trails over my breasts and stomach. Finally, it stops and hot panting breaths wash over my wet curls. Desire clenches in my stomach, it rolls up like a tightly coiled spring waiting to be given release. At the first warm lick to my clit that coil begins to unravel sending out hot pokers of lust in streamers through my body. I rip the pillow away, needing the cool air on my overheated skin and the oxygen. The sight of her between my legs is breath taking. Her red hair is being lit up like a crown of fire from the rays of the rising sun. A finger invades, but I quickly surrender, after a moment it is followed by another one. I'm crumbling away and soon all that will be left of me is my molecules and they will be set free to float on the wind.

I'm pretty sure I screamed and that it was loud. And the sex fairies came forth proclaimed it on high that it was good and went back to their toga party.

As the pounding of the blood in my ears settles back down to a non-deafening level, my sense of hearing returns. Slowly my other senses come back to me as well. I can hear and feel her chuckling lightly as she lays prone on top of me our skin starting to stick together slightly as our mingled sweat starts to cool.

"Pretty proud of yourself huh." I whisper to the top of her head.

"Uh huh." She says with a giggle.

I trail my fingers over her sides and back letting the roughness of my blunt nails dig in slightly. A smile twitches at my lips as she gives a moan. After a few moments of this action being repeated I roll us over when I feel her give a small shudder. On our sides I wiggle down until I am level with a breast, gently I lean in and kiss the tip of the nipple. Then I give small kisses all around the areola, coming back to the tip to give it a lick. The flavor of her salty skin blooms like a flower on my tongue and I dive in wrapping my lips around the nipple and suckle.

Grasping her hands in my hair she groans and then rolls over on to her back. Shaking free of her hands I move to the other breast and start from the beginning again. Anna begins to sweat and shiver, her hands clutch and pinch at my skin. Everything she does; the way she touches me, whispers my name, and whimpers and groans, seems to set my mind in a sort of madness. I can't stop touching her, tasting her. Some sort primal need to crawl inside her and possess her flashes through boiling brain. I can honestly say I'm a biter. When I get worked up in the bedroom, I just have this urge to bite. Now I'm not talking vampire blood sports here, just a nice firm bite. I guess it's a marking territory thing; well at least I don't pee all over everything.

I kiss my way up her chest, my kisses becoming rougher and rougher till they are almost bites. While my head is going up my hand is going down to that smoothed shaved skin of her pubic mound. My fingers lightly trail over it enjoying the smooth slickness that is sometimes broken up

by faint rough stubble. It's a fun contrast for my sense of touch.

I hear her breathing start to hitch which sends me spiraling further into my impassioned haze. My fingers bypass her clit and move into the thick wetness, they map and explore until Anna has had enough and roughly grabs my hand thrusting it into herself.

Groans echo in the room building in point and counter-point to each other. The climax itself is a silent affair; unlike me she is not a screamer. Her hands clutch me tightly while my thumb makes one last pass over her hard straining clit. Her eyes clamp shut and the muscles in her body seem to seize for a moment, and there is an almost inaudible high pitched whine that comes out of her throat then she goes limp.

After the aftershocks quiet I remove my fingers and collapse limp and spent on to the cool sheets. After a moment of coming back into myself I notice that she is still quiet and unmoving. *Did I kill her?* Rolling over onto my side I can see that her eyes are still shut tightly but small tears are leaking out. *Shit!*

"Anna?" No answer. "Anna? Did I?" *Did I what? Hurt her? Did I suck? Was it not what she wanted?* I gulp. "Did I do something wrong?"

She rolls over presenting me with her back. Okay, this I know. That is a clear signal to grab ones clothes and leave.

"It's not supposed to be like this."

I'm confused but stay silent.

"You're sweet and fun!" Anna just trails off.

"Hey, it's okay." It's not okay. Not really. "It's early. Why don't we try and grab some more sleep?" She nods and rolls over and buries her face into my shoulder.

As I'm starting to dose off she whispers. "Why do you have to be so damn likable?"

And the sex fairies in togas lie passed out in the remains of what was a truly wild party, the kegs are tapped dry, and Bacchus would be proud. I have to smile myself; maybe Anna and I will be able to work out some sort of future.

Part 4

"Why do you have to be so damn likable?" Anna had whispered that to me after we had sex for the first time. Apparently I'm not all that "damn likable" because I'm alone in the bed and there's no sign of Anna. I'm not really sure what to do, but I swear if there's money on the nightstand I'm trashing her hotel room. Let her credit card cover that.

Sitting up I'm relieved to see that there's no money; however, there's no note either. *What the hell?* Proper after-sex behavior requires you to at least leave a note if you're going to act like a shmuck and jet. Maybe Anna never got the memo on that. Giving a frustrated scream, I punch the bed a few times. I don't really feel better but I'm a little more awake. Slipping out of the bed, I pick up my clothes and give them a quick sniff. *Ewww!* I recoil at the smell; they smell like the bar, saturated with cigarette smoke and human sweat.

I stand next to the bed, uncertain for a moment. *What to do? What to do? Should I just leave?* Fuck it. I'm not sneaking out with my underwear in my pocket. I'm going to take a shower and maybe even order some room service. Have sex and then leave me, will she? I'll show her. Just because of this I will not get "Anna's love rhino" tattooed on my ass; that'll show her. God, I need a cigarette.

The shower is running and I'm smoking in the bathroom. It's a no-smoking suite; go figure. I have a lit cigarette in one hand that's hanging outside the shower door and the other hand is trying to soap up my body. Every once in awhile I shove my head out and take a drag. I groan, letting the hot water hit my body. Yep, I defiantly had sex last night. I have that pleasant achy muscle thing going on in my thighs and lower abdomen. Thinking about how I got achy gives me a pleasant little shiver. My nostrils flare for a moment but then I'm back to being cool. I'm not certain but I don't think this is going to be a good day. First there's this thing with Anna and then I have a family dinner tonight. Sticking my head out the shower door, I take another drag and then flick the cigarette butt at the toilet. Ducking back under the water, I wash my hair.

Shutting off the water, I sniff the air. *Is that smoke?* You know, I do indeed think it's going to be a bad day. I just want to smack myself on the back of the head. Peeking out of the shower, I'm greeted by the sight of cheery bright orange flames coming from the toilet. *How the hell did I set the toilet on fire? Isn't there water in the thing?* Bolting out of the shower, I run over to the toilet and discover that I completely missed it and hit the trashcan which was full of tissues and a newspaper. *Oh shit, oh shit, ohshitohshit.* I need to put it out. So I do the first thing I think of - I spit on it, which does absolutely nothing. *Oh shit, oh shit, ohshitohshit.* I pick up the flaming trashcan, not feeling the really warm plastic, and run around in little circles trying to figure out how to put it out. I'm not really a morning person; I don't wake up and function until at least one in the afternoon. Next thing I know my legs are flipping out from under me and I'm falling over backwards slipping in a puddle of water while the burning trashcan goes flying. In a small part of my brain, way in the back, I'm wondering if I'm going to be responsible for burning down the hotel and killing a few dozen people. Air comes out of my lungs in a great whoosh as I hit the floor with a wet smack. I'm this close to breaking down in tears, as the hiss of the fire being put out hits my ears. The bathroom door slams open. From my upside-down angle, I can see I managed to hit the toilet; finally. The bathroom door suddenly slams open. There's an Asian woman wielding a fire extinguisher standing in the doorway. Weakly, I joke, "Don't shoot."

She just stares at the thick dark smoke curling out of the toilet, and then glares at me. "This is a no-smoking suite. You know that, right?"

I nod up at her from the floor.

"Okay then, I'll just let you get dressed." She turns to go, then pauses and shoots the fire extinguisher into the toilet. She nods to herself and walks out, shutting the door.

I have never been so embarrassed in my life. Then the time I caught my Mom and Justin having sex on the kitchen table flashes into my mind. That was way more embarrassing than this. Gingerly getting up, I poke at my sore flesh, trying to determine if I'm going to be a big bruise. Amidst all of the poking, none of it good, it dawns on me that there was a strange woman in Anna's room. Wide-eyed, I stop mid-poke. After overanalyzing the whole thing, I jump to the first conclusion that makes any sense - Anna has a girlfriend, and when I walk out of the bathroom, she's going to kill me for sleeping with her girl. Damn those sex fairies and their wily ways. I'm going to get my spleen handed to me on a platter. Great, that's just how I like to start my day. I open the bathroom door, darting my eyes around trying to gage if I can make it to the door before she can stop me. I think I can make it unless she's some sort of kung fu master, in which case I'm toast.

"Hurry up. I have things to do that don't include carting your ass around."

"Um¼ okay." I am so confused it's not even funny. Maybe my spleen will get to stay inside my body. I exit the bathroom looking like a puppy that knows it's going to get spanked for pissing on the carpet. She just looks at me and sighs, rubbing her temples.

"My name is Jordan; I'm Ms. Russell's personal assistant. She had a early morning meeting and wanted me to run you home."

"Oh." I'm looking at Jordan and Jordan's looking back at me. The only thing I can think of is *'Thank God this woman isn't Anna's girlfriend'*. My unstoppable brain then points out that Jordan probably knows that Anna and I had sex. That just makes me feel kind of cheap and easy.

"Anna wanted me to tell you she's very sorry that she couldn't do it herself, but these things happen."

Now I'm pissed; I think I'm more upset at myself for getting into a situation I want to be cool about but I'm really not. "Look, Jordan," I snap, "if it's all the same to you, I do not want you to drive me home. In fact, I'm going to scrape up whatever little bit of ego I have left and dramatically leave the room." You know, I think this whole thing could have been avoided with some after-sex cuddles, Anna leaving me a note, or Anna waking me up and to tell me she was leaving. Holding my head high, I leave the room; being the bigger person, I do not slam the door. Then I open it again. Looking at Jordan, I say, "For the record, tell Ms. Russell that the sex wasn't that great." Then I slam the door. I'm fairly certain I totally overreacted, but then again I'm not a morning person.

My mom used to clean rooms in this hotel. Luckily I know where the employee entrance is so I can sneak out without anyone really noticing me. As I hit the back alley behind the hotel, big fat tears are running down my face. Note to self: - never say you're okay with a one night stand or being fuck buddies when you're really not. I walk out to the street and start hoofing it home. Anther note to self: - stop letting the other person drive. This is the second time I've been

stranded because of a woman.

Thankfully it's only an hour walk home. As I pass people on the street rushing to and from destinations, I begin to get paranoid. Were people eyeing me funny? Could they take a look at me and know I just had a one night stand? God, I can't wait to get home and take another shower. I feel kind of dirty, but I think I'm just messed up in my head. Sex will do that, I guess.

"Carmen. Hey, Carmen."

Hearing Jen's voice, I freeze. Could my day get any worse? Maybe if I start running, she won't know it's me? Damn. No, running will give it away.

"I thought it was you. I was just coming back from a lunch meeting and could have sworn it was you. Lucky me, it was."

"Yeah, lucky you. Um, I'm kind of in a rush, so I'll see you later."

"Hey, you're not still mad at me because of that redhead at the bar, are you? You can hardly blame me; she was hot. I even had a date with her last night for dinner, but she blew me off."

"What? You, what!? You couldn't have." I'm so pissed I think the world has turned red, and I can feel that little vein in the center of my forehead throb.

"Jeez, what's up with you? Of course I had a date with her. I took her to the steak house, then asked her to come back to my place. She thanked me for a good time, but said she had other plans. Can you believe it? She ditched me."

Part of me is thinking *'Oh my God, Jen got ditched'* another part of me is pissed that Jen made a date with my girl. I know that another part of me should be pissed 'cause Anna made a date with Jen, but I'm more focused on the first two reasons. "Yeah, I can believe she ditched you. We had a date."

"What? You and the redhead? Come on."

Jen looks perplexed, like she seriously can't imagine me and Anna together. My fuse is already pretty short today and Jen seems determined to light it. I round on her and the look in my eye must be murder 'cause she takes a step back. I'm in her personal space, flailing my limbs and gesturing. "Yes, me and the redhead. She has a name, you know; it's Anna. What the hell is wrong with you? Every time I find a girl or show interest in one, you're all over them, sniffing in my territory like some sort of bitch in heat!"

"What, like it's my fault they find me attractive?" She looks stunned.

"No, it's not your fault, but if you were really my friend you wouldn't: A - encourage them, B- actually have sex with them, C - tell me about it."

"What kind of friend would I be if I let you keep dating those women? If any of them had been right for you, they wouldn't have jumped after me."

"What kind of perverse logic is that?" People are giving us a wide berth on the sidewalk.

"Look, Carmen, I don't want to argue with you about someone who's only going to be in town for a little bit. Obviously, Anna is just after a good time. Seriously, what kind of woman makes two dates with two different women on the same night?"

I ¼ gah, ¼ I hate her perverse logic. I just can't take anymore. Those big fat tears from earlier come back, I'm sobbing, and I hate the fact that I'm breaking down in front of Jen.

"Oh hey, what's going on?"

Jen's arms come around me and I want to push her away but I don't have the strength for it. I don't want Jen's comfort, pity, or anything else.

"I just want to go home," I sob into her chest.

"Um, okay."

If I wasn't so upset I would be amused at how I've stunned Jen. She's guiding us off the sidewalk and into the shadows of the parking garage. She leads me up two flights of stairs then she's opening the passenger door on her Durango and sliding me inside.

She gets in, starts the SUV, and pulls out. She hands me a tissue; I grab it and blow my nose. Out of the corner of my eye I can see her eyeing me. I'm just waiting for her to put two and two together as her eyes take in my rumpled appearance.

"So did you at least practice safe sex?"

For a moment I want to slap her, but she has a valid point.

"From your silence I assume I can take it the answer is no. Did you talk about your sexual history at all?"

I slump further and further down into my seat. Here I thought I couldn't feel any worse. Boy, was I wrong.

"Carmen, you should really know better."

"Fuck you! I don't want a lecture." Anger feels so much better than hollowness.

"I'm just trying to help."

"Well, you're not. I'm tired of your help. I'm a goddamn adult and it's about time you guys started

treating me like one. I'm Carmen. Not, Olivia's brainy younger sister here to tutor you all through class."

"Well, then start acting like an adult."

"I, ¼ why, ¼ I can't¼" Big breath. "Fuck you!" Thankfully Jen is stopped at a light as I open the door and get out, slamming it shut. It's very childish, but I don't care. As I sprint off down a side street, I can hear Jen calling after me.

I stumble through my front door, happy to see that no one is home. The insistent ringing of the phone greets me, but I ignore it. I just want to go to bed and pretend this day never happened. As I start to walk by the kitchen, the answering machine picks up. "Carmen, are you there? It's Anna. Jordan told me you just stormed off. What's wrong? Please call me." Her voice slides through me, making me feel uncertain of myself. I rub a hand over my face, trying to wipe away some of the confusion. The phone rings again, and my hand hovers over it. Maybe it's Anna again. I should really talk to her; maybe I did overreact. My uncertainty freezes me until the answering machine picks up again. "Carmen, you home? What's wrong with you? Give me a call. Your behavior today has me worried." It's Jen. Her voice reawakens my anger. In my mind I get the sickening vision of Anna and Jen fucking each other, limbs all shaky and sweaty, entwined together.

With a scream I pick up the small gray machine and hurl it against the far wall. God, my maturity is at an all time low today. My hands are shaking; my vision is narrowing into tiny little tunnels; and I think I'm crying again. I never knew I had so much salt water just waiting to leak out of my body. My legs give out and I'm kneeling in the middle of the kitchen, sobbing. The phone starts to ring again; I'm fairly certain this is the kind of day that creates axe-wielding psychos. Oh God. I still have to survive a family dinner night tonight.

I take deep breaths, one after another, until I think I've gotten control of my water leakage problem. Rising off the kitchen floor, I stagger my way to my room and shut the door behind me. In the dark room I strip my clothes off, sending them in the general direction of the clothes hamper, and slide between my sheets, hugging a pillow to me as I curl around it. The darkness is soothing and the sheets smell of just me - well, just me and some bar smoke - but that's a part of my life. As I drift off to sleep a thought rolls through my brain. Someday it would be nice to have my sheets smell like somebody else but know it would be okay because they were a part of me.

Eyelids move rapidly as the mind moves into REM sleep, hands curl around the pillow, clutching hard, and breathing becomes ragged. A mind is never at rest; it's always searching for the answers to questions nobody asked.

I feel a soft pressure, from a hand stroking my hair. It feels good and I lift my head into the

comfort, of the connection being offered. Rolling over onto my back, I struggle with my eyelids; they feel heavy and rough but I get them open. Shock has me instantly awake. I am so consumed by fear I can't even scream. The blue eyes are gone, the face is smashed and broken, but the blonde hair is the same, only streaked with red in some places.

"Hey, kid."

The mouth doesn't move but I can hear her just fine. "Would you just leave me alone?"

"Sorry, it doesn't work like that. You work through your issue and tell the truth about what happened to me and I'll go away."

"God. For the last time, you committed suicide. You jumped off the goddamn cliff."

"Come on. You and I both know it's not true."

"Yes, it is. You just won't admit it."

"I'm dead. Holding on to secrets isn't high on my list of things to do."

"Why the hell are you bugging me now? I haven't thought about you in years."

"Because the truth isn't just about you and your so-called friends. You're so self-absorbed that you can't see the big picture. When you do, everything will come together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle."

"I am not self-absorbed."

"Sure you are, but kids normally are until they grow up a little."

"What the hell? Are you channeling Jen?"

"Right, like I'd channel that bitch. But compared to Ashley and your sister, she's a saint. At least with Jen, the person you see is the person you get. Olivia and Ashley are wrapped up in shadows."

"Could you be any more cryptic? What the hell does that mean?"

The corpse that used to be Heidi laughed, a cold sound that rattles my bones. Fear rises up again inside me as I realize I'm lying in bed with a corpse.

"Time to wake up. Olivia's here." Thin arms of sunken flesh shove me out of bed. I gasp out, "Olivia?" and then I'm falling.

With a gasp and a flailing of my limbs, I shoot up in bed. "Olivia?"

"God, goober, could you sleep any deeper? I've been trying to wake you up for the last 5 minutes."

"What the hell are you¼ Heidi was¼ then you¼" I fade out. The nightmare I was having becomes vague and unclear.

"Heidi? Why were you dreaming about that loser?" Olivia's tone is sharp, snapping me into the here and now.

"Just a nightmare. I think I still feel bad."

"Well, you shouldn't, not after what she did to ¼ she got what she deserved."

"Jesus, Olivia. She died. Let's not speak ill of the dead, okay?"

"Fine."

"Why are you bugging me?"

She lifts an eyebrow. "Family dinner night. It started 15 minutes ago. Mom sent me to get you."

Panic sets in. I have committed the holy grail of family offenses; I am late for a family function. "Oh my God." Eloquent, I know, but it's the first thing that comes to mind.

"Come on, get up and lets get going."

"Kay."

Olivia stands next to my bed, looking down at me expectantly. "Well?" she asks after a minute of not moving.

"I'm kind of naked here. A little privacy, please."

She rolls her eyes. "I'll be waiting."

After she leaves I sigh and get up to dress. I pull out my nice slacks and button-up shirt. I always leave them hanging nicely pressed, ready for such family dinner night emergencies like tonight. Actually I don't own very many nice clothes. I'm more of a jeans and wacky T-shirt girl. I slide into the slacks and tuck in my shirt. I hate tucking my shirt in; it's odd how one little act can make me feel restricted and trapped by my own clothes.

Olivia and I arrive at the house with minimal butt chewing in the car. She ragged on me again about getting a cell phone. I have lived my life this long without one and I don't see it making a big impact now. With my luck I'd lose it while I was mountain biking and the raccoons would call Cambodia or something. I get out of the car, tugging on my shirt.

"You look fine. Quit messing with your shirt." Olivia pauses and squints at my shirt then down at my pants. "Isn't that the same outfit you wore to Christmas dinner?"

"It's the same outfit I've worn to every family function for the last 3 years. Jeez, you really pay attention."

"Well, you're such a fashion mistake that I try not to notice what you're wearing."

"Thank you, Martha Stewart."

"Duh, if you're going to insult me, do it right. Martha is decorating not fashion."

"Fine. Here's a simple one you can get. Stop being such a bitch." That's the moment my mom opens the door to welcome us inside. Her face pales, her mouth drops open, and she looks shocked. That, in turn, shocks me 'cause just last week she was calling the mayor of our town a lot worse than bitch.

She starts yelling at me in Spanish and my palms begin to sweat. I have no idea what she's saying. It's either something about embarrassing me in front of Justin's sisters or there's a cat on fire in my nostril. When she grabs me by the nose and drags me into the house, I get a pretty big clue it's not to put out the cat. My eyes are watering as she drags me to the back of the house, lecturing me the whole way. Thankfully she's not rambling in English which means no one but Olivia knows what she's saying.

"Mom, stop. Let go of my nose."

She shuts her bedroom door and stares at me. "Carmen, it is family dinner night. You will behave and be nice to your sister."

"She started it."

"Bu, bu, bu¼ I don't want to hear it. You behave yourself or you leave and never come back."

"Jesus, Mom, that's a bit melodramatic." I wince as she smacks me upside the head. "Owww! Mother!"

"Do not take the Lord's name in vain like that."

"I said Jesus, not God." I take a step back.

"Oh my Carmen. You were always the nice one, the smart one, so polite, and so kind. What has happened to you?"

I fight really hard not to roll my eyes. "Mom, I promise to be on my best behavior. Okay?" She smiles and kisses my cheeks and leads me to the dining room. Whoo hoo, anal leakage here I come.

Olivia smirks as we enter. The table is set and all eyes turn to us. Oh joy, I see that Justin's evil sisters and some of their spawn have arrived. I have to grit my teeth to keep at bay all the nasty comments I want to utter upon seeing Janet and Karen's superior 'I just sucked on a lemon' facial expressions. Grandma grabs me as I go to pass by and pulls me down for a hug. She may look tiny and shrunken but Grandma is made of iron. She holds me for a moment, looking into my eyes, and then says something I don't understand, but - I think it's probably a prayer - then she kisses my cheek and lets me go. Grandpa just blinks off into space. I remember when Grandpa Cortez was big and scary, but now he's just a tiny lost man who wanders around the house yelling for his long dead dog. It's kind of sad.

"Hello, Abo. How are you today?"

He looks over at me, blinks, and then rambles something off in Spanish. I look to Grandma for a translation; when she studiously ignores my unspoken plea, I kick Olivia.

"Ow! What did you do that for?"

"What did he say?"

"Oh. He wants to know who the hell you are and what you're doing in his house."

I blink and look at Olivia. "Did he really?"

She looks down at her plate but I can see the sad quirk to her lips. "When did he get so bad and how come I never noticed?"

She shrugs. "Some days are better than others. Today is a bad day, I guess."

I nod and look at everything but Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma looks embarrassed by his outburst and Grandpa looks lost again.

Karen and Janet are talking to Justin, ignoring everybody who is non-Anglo or of questionable racial background. I'm happy to see that they have left their husbands at home, or maybe left them with their mistresses. Their husbands just look just like the type of self-important businessmen who would have them. Karen's youngest daughter, Michelle, is sitting next to Olivia. Michelle is 18 and in her first year at the university. Janet's youngest son, Dillon, is sitting next to her. Dillon is a senior in high school and is a poster boy for why steroids are bad. Now that he has no neck, there's a strong resemblance to a frog. Apparently their two eldest have grown wise or figured out excellent excuses to get them out of family dinner night.

Justin gives me a little wave from the head of the table then goes back to his conversation with Janet.

Dinner is going well. No one has spoken to me directly so I don't have to try to play nice. My mother smiles and nods, running back and forth from the kitchen to the table, keeping everything

well stocked. It's keeping Dillon's girth well stocked as well. Man, can that boy shovel it in. The way my mother plays servant at these family get-togethers used to bug me a lot when I was going through my feminist phase. However, when I got older I realized that every time Justin tried to help my Grandpa, his sisters, and my mother would all come down hard on Justin if he tried to help. Blah, blah, blah¼ Justin, it's the role of the women, role of the mother, role of the wife to¼ blah, blah. So Justin did the smart thing; he sat his ass down at the head of the table and kept his mouth shut. Justin is a "pick your battles wisely" sort of guy. He doesn't believe in the macho husband crap, and I know he loves my mom dearly. He's the kind of guy who doesn't forget the important dates: birthdays, anniversaries, high school concert recitals or the day you came out. He brings Mom flowers just because he sometimes starts thinking about her and gets overwhelmed with love for her. He shows up at the house with dinner because he wants to make sure us slacker types are eating right. When I grow up, I want to be just like Justin.

"So, Carmen, how is work?"

I stop chewing in confusion. Michelle has asked me a question and I'm almost certain there's no hidden 'slam on Carmen' agenda in there.

"Michelle, you know Carmen doesn't have a job," Karen hisses out.

I swallow, wondering if Michelle and Karen have a tag team effort going on.

"She does too; she's a DJ at a club. That must be so much fun."

"Being a DJ is not a real job. Especially in that sort of place."

Okay, Michelle, I think, is being serious. The first thing I wonder is if Michelle is a closet lesbian or maybe a fag hag. Karen is just pissing me off; nothing new there.

"Yeah, making a hundred bucks on a good night for four and half hours worth of work is most definitely not a real job. It's a totally fake job." What I don't say is that good nights are rare and I normally take home fifty bucks.

Michelle giggles at that and I have to wonder if maybe she's adopted. She stops as soon as her mother and her aunt give her the look of death. Mama is giving me my own death glare.

"And just what do you mean 'especially in that sort of place'? You mean in a place where people are gay?" I stare back challengingly, waiting to see what Karen will do.

It's the gasp from my mother that lets me know I may have gone too far. My eyes dart to her, and - *'oh crap'* - she's genuflecting, which means I have traveled into the realm of the profane. Everybody's eyes at the dinner table have zeroed in on Grandma. She stops eating, a puzzled expression on her face.

"What? I think it's wonderful that young people can go to a place and be happy."

Oh, thank God. I've never been so happy that Grandma is so out of date than at this moment. She goes back to eating while Mom gives me the look of death. Justin is trying to hide a smile and Olivia is just smirking at me. Okay, I just need to shift attention away from me to someone else. Come on, brain, think. My eyes move from dinner guest to dinner guest, trying to quickly come up with something. "Speaking of real jobs. How's work, Olivia?"

I caught her unawares and in mid-gulp of her water. I'm good.

Coughing, she turns bright red, giving me the evil eye, and I have to wonder if it's genetic because it looks exactly like the one Mom is giving me.

"Yes, Olivia, how is your job going?" Karen butts in. "Michelle, Olivia has a good job with benefits at MR Technologies. You should really be talking to her about job opportunities."

Michelle rolls her eyes at her mother's condescending tone. You know, there may be hope for her yet; more and more I'm thinking Michelle was adopted.

Olivia clears her throat. "Well, until a few days ago my job was going fine. Apparently somebody has been skimming a little money from the company and the stockholders have brought in an independent consulting firm to check us out from top to bottom."

My ears perk up at the word 'consulting'. Is this why Anna is in town? I feel 1/4 upset at the thought that Anna and my sister might be working together. Maybe even a little bit angry, but most definitely I am not jealous because that would be silly, not to mention irrational. I am not any of those things. I think the sex fairies are laughing at me, damn little bastards. I almost miss what Olivia is saying.

1/4 and to top it off, I have some bitchy little oriental woman breathing down my neck, asking for books and data from the last three years like I'm some sort of secretary or number cruncher."

Well, Anna is not oriental, and I'm almost tempted to ask Olivia what exactly she does at MR Tech 'cause it doesn't sound like she does much.

"Olivia! You will watch your language at the table."

It's my turn to snicker as sister dearest realizes her improper use of language. "Someone's in trouble," I taunt.

She kicks me under the table. "Ow! Mom, Olivia is kicking me."

Mom just glares at us both. Michelle snickers while Karen and Janet pretend I don't exist.

"So, Carmen, how was your date last night?"

Fork halfway to my mouth, I freeze in terror. She looks so innocent, but I'm sure she's the secret twin of the anti-Christ.

"Carmen, you had a date? Was he a nice boy?"

Jeez, that's one way to get Grandma to perk right up. Justin looks like he's going to bust a gut; except for Olivia, everyone else looks horrified.

"Um, Abi, there was no boy." Deep breath and go. "I'm a lesbian. Lesbians only like other women, not boys." And brace for impact. Grandma starts going off and either I'm going to hell or the raccoon steals underwear from the drawer at night, one of the two. "Oh, and Olivia is a lesbian too. Ow! Olivia, stop kicking me!"

"Well, you didn't have to remind Abi I was a dyke too."

Being the mature young adults that we are, Olivia and I glare at each other, ready to shower each other with green beans when Dillon decides to join the table conversation in true hormonal teenage boy form. "You two just haven't met the right man yet." He says it with a leer and I swear he's undressing us with his eyes. Okay, I'm not really related to the over-pumped hormone, but still - ewwww. Doing some sort of silent sister mind meld, Olivia and I come to a truce and fire green beans at Dillon.

Justin is still chuckling as he hands me a towel. "Your mother and grandmother may never speak to you again!" He pauses to laugh some more. "But that was just too damn funny, and Dillon really needed to get whomped by two girls."

I just glare out from under soggy bangs.

"Oh sure, it doesn't seem funny now, but just you wait. Someday you'll be sitting in a cubicle somewhere, having finally sold out to 'the man', and you'll think back to the night where you clobbered a walking testicle with hundreds of semi-cooked green beans, nearly giving your Abuela a heart attack, and setting Karen's eyebrows on fire."

In all honesty, the Great Green Bean War of 17 minutes ago was started mostly in fun to get back at Dillon's walking hormone mouth. It's hardly my fault the walking steroid can't roll with the punches or, in this case, the green beans. I end up outside with Justin while Olivia and Mom deal with Grandma. I can hear Spanish being spoken rapidly, sounding almost like gunfire from inside the house.

"You think Grandma is going to try to perform an exorcism on me?"

He looks at me for a moment then we both start laughing. He throws the towel over my head and

starts to vigorously dry my hair. "Oh, Carmen, don't ever change."

"You mean that?" I sputter out from under the towel

"Of course I do. Why?"

"Lately, well, everybody¼ do I act like a self-absorbed child?"

"Carmen, I'm going to let you in on a little secret." He pulls the towel off my head to make sure I'm listening. His blue eyes look into my brown ones. "No matter how old you get, there are always going to be times when you act like a spoiled child. Just look at your Abuelo."

"Well, Abo is allowed. He can't remember what year it is anymore."

"Its not that. I remember the first time I met the man after your mom and I had been dating awhile. He looked at me and said 'The only way you are marrying my daughter, white boy, is if you can knock me out with one punch.'"

"Abo said that?"

"Yep."

"You knocked out my Abo?"

"Nope, your Grandmother did. She came outside, caught him being an ass, and laid him out, yelling all the time that this was America and people didn't act like that here."

I chuckle. Grandma should come down to the bar and see all the dyke drama as well as some well-fought-out gay boy drama. "Go, Abi," I breathe out. "You think Abi is going to be okay? She got awfully pale."

"Yeah, by the next family dinner she will have once again forgotten you're a lesbian. You can shock her all over again and even out Olivia one more time. It's almost not a true family dinner unless you two come out of the closet as lesbians yet again. You wanna know what I think?"

I shrug. Of course I do. I'm sitting here, aren't I? "Sure."

"I think it's a game the three of you look forward to playing. You and Olivia taunt each other, then one outs the other. Abuela feigns shock and outrage. My sisters throw a snit, although lighting Karen on fire this time was an inspired touch."

I can't help it; I have to blush. Either Olivia or I had knocked over one of the candles on the table in our frenzied rush to pelt frog boy with green semi-cooked goodness. The candle landed right in front of Karen on her napkin. The napkin promptly lit on fire and I - honest I was trying to be helpful - I tried to put it out. Another honesty moment - I thought, for the record, that it was grape juice not wine. Grandma has a heart condition; she's not supposed to be drinking alcohol. I

threw what I thought was grape juice on the burning napkin only to have it billow up in a great flame, eating away Karen's eyebrows and most of her bangs. That's when things got ugly. Distracted by the vast amount of chaos I had caused, I never saw frog boy's soup bowl until it was too late. Covered in soup, I tripped over Grandpa's walker and fell back into the kitchen. At least then I was out of the fray. To her credit, Olivia took out Dillon by using her plate as a Frisbee.

I snort, trying to keep my laughter in, and with as straight a face as I can muster, I say, "At least no cops showed up this time."

Justin pauses and then starts howling with laughter. I can't hold back and join him. Last Thanksgiving the cops got called to our place for a "domestic disturbance". Douglas, Janet's eldest, a walking study in backwards evolution, tried to hit on Jen. When he didn't understand that no meant no, Jen just casually reached over with her dessert fork and stabbed Douglas' wandering hand that as it tried to burrow for warmth in her crotch. As he's yowling in pain and bleeding all over the place, Jen just as casually tells him to shut up, he's disrupting dinner. Janet, of course, freaks out; well, I think we were all freaking out except Jen. Somehow the freaking out and yelling disturbed the neighbors and the next thing we know the cops are there and we're all being hauled in. It was the best Thanksgiving ever. I even had my picture taken with my cellmates so I could remember it. Trust me, sitting in a cell with a teenage runaway, two pros, and a loud drunk was a picnic compared to other family dinner nights.

We pause for breath as Mom comes outside; she looks at us carefully. "Abuela is going to be okay. We got some heart medicine into her and she's resting. Why we have to do this every time remains a mystery to me." She mutters something in Spanish which I think was a prayer for peace. "While I'm not happy, I do hope Janet will leave that horrible boy at home next time. It's not proper for him to be looking the way he was at Carmen. She's his cousin."

"Yeah, we're a little too far north for that to be proper." Whoa, death glare! I'm shutting up now.

"Now, honey, as dinners go, this one was a good one. Karen's eyebrows will grow back," Justin reassures mama.

She cracks a smile. "Couldn't have happened to a nicer lady."

I'm shocked, I tell you, shocked. Mom does have a evil bone in her body.

Justin gives her a sweet little kiss on her temple. "I think Carmen here is decent; she can be let back into the house."

Mom snorts at the concept of me being decent. "Carmen, my little one, whatever am I going to do with you?" She gives a sigh and carefully wraps me in a hug so she won't get wet. "She's not coming inside until she stops dripping."

I sigh and sit back down, throwing the towel over my face.

"So did you have a good date?"

Justin is a nosey little shit. "It was just coffee."

"Is that anything like 'Would you like to see my china?'"

I throw the towel at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind; it's from a play. So was it coffee or was it 'coffee'?"

"It was the¼" Okay, I know Justin isn't really my dad, but he's damn near close enough, and I wish he were my biological dad so I'm not going to have a talk about my sex life.

"Oooooo, I see you blushing. Was she hot?"

"Justin!"

"Come on, sweetheart, I don't really want details because then I would have to go find her to give her the third degree, make sure she's good enough for my little girl. You going to see her again?"

I frown. Good question. "I don't know. I think it was a one-night thing, and¼" I pause, fumbling for the right words.

"And you're not sure that's the thing for you."

"Yeah, pretty much. I felt kind of dirty."

"Did you two talk about it?"

"Yes, and I thought I would be okay with it, but I was wrong."

"Did you tell her this or did you just have a major freak out?"

"Um, well, er¼ the last one."

"It will be okay." He gives me a big solid hug, not caring that he gets wet. "But you may want to talk to her, not for her but for you so you can work through the emotional crap you're storing up because of this experience."

"Thanks, Justin."

"Hey, what are dads for?"

"I'm so glad Mom married you."

"Me too, sweetheart."

The father-daughter bonding moment is ended by Olivia's call to action. "Come on, goober, we're getting the hell out of Dodge before we knock over a gas main and blow up the neighborhood."

"Fine." I roll my eyes and disengage from Justin.

Justin and Olivia just smile at each other but make no move to hug. They have always been a little cool towards each other, while Justin and I have been close. Maybe it's because Olivia is older and can actually remember our biological dad. Whatever the reason, they're not that close.

"See you later."

"Bye, Carmen. Oh, Carmen, bring your bike over on Friday and I'll give it a tune-up."

"Cool. See you Friday." I give a little wave and squish on out to Olivia's car.

[Continued...](#)

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~ D'Artagnan ~
by Zee

Disclaimer:

I wish to disclaim I hate doing the disclaimer. This story revolves around a lesbian. So I'm guessing if the word lesbian bothers you don't want to read this.

No real violence to talk about until much later in the story. As for sex, yes its in there.

Enjoy.

Please send feedback to: zeeamy@gmail.com

Part 5

Olivia drops me off and I make the trek to the house. The lights are on so people are home. Opening the door, I call out, "Hello?"

"In the kitchen," Sue responds

I squish on into the kitchen. I cough as I walk in; smoke hangs in the kitchen air. "You might want to crack a window there."

"Nah," Rob says with a giggle, "just breathe deeper."

I take another breath; the smoke tastes a little funny. "Oh man, you all started without me."

Now that I'm a little closer, I can see the pipe that Ed is charging. The table is littered with wine bottles and purple-stained paper cups. "So I take it, it was a stay-at-home evening."

Ed grunts, holding in the smoke as he passes the pipe to Rob.

"Carmen, darling, come here. We need to have a little chat about something." Sue pulls out a chair.

I amble over, grinning at their stoned faces. Sitting down, I freeze as I see the mangled remains of the answering machine.

"So," Sue starts, "I need to ask. Did it leap out and attack you? Did you need to beat it off?"

Rob and Ed start to snicker.

"Yeah, Carmen, I think it's time that we, as your friends, bring to light certain behavior that is troubling us ¼ like your abuse of answering machines." Everyone starts laughing at that point but me. I happen to think that they're not funny people at all.

Sue notices that I'm not joining in on the laughter. "Awe, hun, what's up? You have a bad day?" I nod my head and sit on her lap so she can hug me. Yeah, I know it looks sexual because Rob's drooling on himself. Rob can be an unthinking pig on occasion but it's worse when he's stoned because he can't guard his expressions worth shit.

"How did your date go?"

"Date?" Rob chimes in. "Oh right, the hottie from the bar."

I can just tell he's gone off to his happy place with some lesbian fantasy. Ignoring him, I reply to Sue, "Lousy."

"But you didn't come home so it couldn't have been all bad."

"Well, no, parts of it were very good."

They cheer like good-humored barbarians.

"Details! Details!" they shout and I just blush. Blushing just starts the wolf whistles.

"Well, that gives away the fact that you had sex."

Sue surprises me. Being stoned doesn't seem to corrupt her faculties at all,; she's still sharp as a

sword.

"Was it any good.?"

"Dude." Ed elbows Rob in the side. That's his way of telling Rob he overstepped his bounds.

Ed's always my knight, or the big brother I never had; knowing my biological father, Mathew, he could be my brother.

"Ah¼ I'll¼ uh, I need some fresh air," Rob stammers out and gets up to leave.

Poor Rob, he just realized all that stuff he should keep quietly in his head was actually coming out.

Sue hugs me. "Please don't be too pissed at my boyfriend," she whispers.

"I know, he's a stoned pig. Tomorrow, if he makes death-by-chocolate cake, I'll forgive him."

"You know he will."

"Cool," is Ed's one-cent contribution.

"So is there anything you want to spill to your quite-toked-up best buds to ease the worry lines on your face? And um, why are you all wet?"

I burst out laughing. "Family dinner night."

"Dude."

"Oh, no arrests this time?" Sue asks.

"Nope, but Karen lost her eyebrows to a hungry candle."

Okay, it's funny, but not that funny. Ed and Sue start laughing so hard I think they might crack ribs.

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer lady," Sue wheezes out, wiping tears from her eyes. "So is there anything else you want to share about your night of sin?"

I sigh, playing with the hem of my shirt. "Not right now, okay? I'm kind of shared out after the talk Justin and I had."

"Okay."

"Smoke?" Ed asks, handing me the pipe.

"Okay, but just one. I'm going to bed; I have to run messages tomorrow morning." I take the pipe and light it; taking a heavy draw, I hold it in my lungs, letting it burn. Releasing my breath, I can feel my head becoming light. "Thanks."

Ed just grins.

"Night." I give Sue a hug and get off her lap. Ed squeezes my arm and I ruffle his short spiky hair. As I go downstairs to my room, I hear Sue yelling at Rob, " Okay, you coward, you can come back inside now. She'll forgive you for being an ass but you have to make cake."

You really can't feel the burn by biking a couple of blocks and then stopping to drop off a letter or a package. This is my real job, the one that pays the bills and gives me lousy medical and dental benefits with no vision coverage. Bearing down hard on my hand brakes, I barely miss some asshole who is refusing to merge and is driving in the bike lane to prove some point. "Jackass!" I give him the finger for good measure. That will teach him. It's 8:00 A.M, time for the morning commute. I've been up since 5:00 getting my assignments. We're valued for our speed, timeliness, and discretion. Which - which means we don't peek. Once I think I delivered a package for the Mob. It was at some seedy bar to a big guy whose name could have been Guido. Waiting at a light, I feel my work cell phone vibrate against my leg. There are times that I'm tempted to toss it down my pants for a cheap thrill; of course, that was mainly during my two year sex drought. I pull up onto the sidewalk, out of the way, and flip the phone open.

"Carmen."

"Are you on your way back to the office?"

"Yeah, I just dropped off ¼ um¼" I wrack my brain for a moment. "¼ Mr. Kimble's package." God, this job makes me feel like a gangster or some sort of government agent.

"Kay, I need you to go down to a Bailey's Private Investigations and pick up a package for an Alexis Knight at MR Tech."

"Oh!"

"Anything wrong?"

"No¼. no, give me the address for Bailey's."

I shut the cell phone and peddle back onto the road. Only five more hours then it's beers on the porch with Ed and Sue.

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The lady looks at me, up and down from head to toe. "I was hoping you would be a guy. You know, in those tight biking shorts." She sighs, having been deprived of sexual eye-candy.

"How do I know you're the bike courier? You're not even wearing bike shorts."

I snort and look at my shirt; it's like a big billboard on my chest, and back emblazoned front and back with an ad for the courier company. As for the bike shorts, they just aren't practical. I wear the cargo shorts 'cause they have pockets for everything: work cell, ID, bandages, and antibiotic cream. You wouldn't imagine how banged up I get doing this job. I'm fine on the bike. Sure, I have idiot drivers who can't see me despite the bright yellow shirt. but offices are death traps. And Jen, Ashley, and Olivia wonder why I don't want to join the corporate rat race. I've had my fingers slammed in doors, cabinets, and elevators. I've poked my ass and thigh I don't know how many times on sharp desks corners. Hot coffee's been spilled on me and a typewriter's been thrown at my head. The typewriter wasn't personal; somebody had just been let go and they were trying to get their boss. I bet there's an ambulance just sitting down the street from every major business and corporation, just waiting for a daily call to come cart away some dumbass who was strangled when their tie got caught in the shedder. Thank you but no. I'll keep my nice slow death by secondhand smoke at the club; at least I'll go with a smile on my face and alcohol in my system. People in the office culture don't smile a lot unless they're on top of the pyramid, but only one person gets to sit on the top, which leaves a lot of unsmiling people.

"Well, yes, the shirt does give it away, but do you have some ID? The lady at the office said you all had ID."

"Yep." I pull out my ID and hand it to her. She nabs it and picks up the phone.

"Hi. Yes, this is Jamie, the secretary at Bailey's¼ Fine, thank you. Do you have a Carmen Webster working for you?¼ Thank you."

I look at her. "I check out."

"Yep, you're cleared."

This lady is good, but she does work for a private eye so I suppose it comes with the territory. I reach my hand out for my ID but the secretary looks lost in thought. I politely cough.

"Oh, sorry. Here ya go. It's just that your name sounds familiar¼ Carmen Webster¼ oh well, we probably investigated you."

My eyes get wide. "You what?"

"Did you cheat on your spouse?"

"Did I what?"

"We do a lot of those ¼ cheating partners."

"I doubt it. I hardly date."

"Oh well, guess I'm wrong." She hands me a thick manila envelope. "Now no peeking."

"Never." I reassure her with a smile. I take the package and seal it in my bag.

"Thanks. Oh, you think you could get one of the male couriers to bike past the window? It would make my day."

I laugh. "I'll see what I can do." That lady just made my day.

- - - - -

MR Tech is not bicycle friendly;(semicolon) there isn't one bike rack out front to lock my bike to. When I tried to lock it to the tree, the rather plump front desk security guard came waddling over to tell me I couldn't. Fine. There's a solution to my problem; I just don't know what it is. I ponder a moment, my eyes sweeping over the elegant landscaping and the concrete parking lot, before inspiration strikes. Grinning evilly, I walk inside with my bike and lock it around the statue of good old MR himself. MR, or Morris Restenhoven - yeah, I would go with MR as well - was a rich coot who bought a struggling tech firm and knocked some business sense into it. When it started to show a profit, he changed the name.

The lady at the front desk smiles at me. "How can I help you?"

"I have a package for a Ms. Alexis Knight. My sister works here; if it's not too much of a bother, I thought I might step in and say a quick hello."

"Not a problem. Who's your sister?"

"Olivia Webster."

"Oh, you must be Carmen."

"Yep, that would be me."

"I remember you from the annual employee picnic. You and your sister kicked some booty at the

three-legged race."

I laugh; that was only a couple of months ago. I actually had a good time with my sister. I wasn't her first choice to invite to the employee picnic but since Jen bailed at the last minute, I was a good stand in. It was free food so I didn't really mind. Oddly Olivia and I had a lot of fun with each other, something that hasn't happened since we were grade schoolers and the Bridgewaters' had yet to move in down the street. I guess as you get older you treasure the good memories, keep them close at hand, and ignore the rest.

"That would be me. One half of the three-legged wonder team."

"Okay, Carmen, just sign here, put this badge on, and I'll buzz you in. Oh, and you better move fast. That security guard will be back and he'll have a stroke when he sees where you locked your bike."

I clip the badge on and grin. "He should exercise more."

"Yes, he should. I keep wondering what he's going to protect me from."

"Well, as most folks can figure out^{1/4} I look for her name plate. "^{1/4}Stella, you're the only one keeping this company safe from the unwashed masses."

"Darn tootin', and don't you forget it. Okay, Alexis is on the top floor. Olivia is on the third. Have fun."

I laugh and move towards the door, opening it when I hear the buzz.

Getting in the elevator I push the button for the third floor. I hum quietly along with the standard elevator musical fare. A tone beeps at me and the doors open; I shuffle off looking for clues as to where my sister's office might be. I smile and try to look official in my yellow billboard shirt; people just smile back but nobody stops me. Near the end I find a door that has the name 'O. Webster' on it. I'm happy to see she doesn't have a big corner office; it's the little petty things that keep me going. Actually I hope it's Olivia's office and not an Oliver's office. Maybe I should knock. Hesitant with uncertainty, I step closer to knock when I realize the door's not shut all the way. I'll just nudge it a bit and take a peek.

The door flutters open another inch and I stick my eye up to the opening. I can see the edge of a desk - not very informative. I toe the door with some more force, now my eyeball and my nose can stick in. I struck gold; I can see the back of Olivia's head. She's on the phone and not very happy.

"Ash^{1/4} God damn it! This is a very bad time for you to do this to me." The pencil in between her fingers snaps in two. "I can't do it right now! ^{1/4} Why? Because I have some Asian bitch breathing down my neck. Her and her team are tearing through the books and numbers. So yeah, I do think this is a bad time for one of your transactions."

I frown. Okay, I could take that a bad way, a very bad way, but this is my sister here. She wouldn't¼ I mean, Olivia's a stickler for rules and has no fun because there are rules against fun, and¼

"God no, Ash, please don't! Give me some time! Well, I'm very sorry. Maybe you should think about things before you gamble with mobsters."

Okay, using the word 'mobster' in a sentence is bad.

"Ash, if you insist on¼ God no, whatever you do, don't tell¼

I lean a little too enthusiastically on the door and it gives a creak. Olivia stiffens in her chair and turns. Oh God, think, brain, think. Process, you mighty stallion of logic.

I smile. "Don't tell who what?" The blood drains from Olivia's face; it would almost be funny if I didn't think she was going to tumble over dead.

"Olivia, you okay?" I rush to her side. "I'm sorry. I only came by to surprise you. It was supposed to be a good surprise." I reach for the glass and pitcher of water on her desk. Pouring a glass I hand it to her.

"How long were you standing there?"

"Just a second," I lie. I'm not sure why I'm lying but it feels important that I do, so I go with my gut on this one.

"Oh, okay." She sips the water and the color seems to come back in to her face. She hands the glass back to me and I set it down.

"Sorry, I'm really stressed lately. Those consultants have me jumping through hoops." She hangs up the phone.

"Shouldn't you have said good-bye?"

"It was just Ash; she'll get over it."

"Oh, what did she want?"

"The usual mayhem."

"Of course, whatever was I thinking."

"You here on business?"

"Yep. One package for Alexis Knight."

"Really? Can I see?"

I don't like the evil way my sister's eyes light up. "Nope. Sorry, I can only hand it over to the receivee. That would not be you."

"Car¼"

"Don't Car me. I'll lose my job."

"But I'm your sister."

"So?"

"Fine. So you were in the neighborhood and thought you'd look me up."

"Yep, I was wondering what you really did. I now find my illusions shattered. You're a pencil-pushing geek."

Olivia laughs and ruffles my hair affectionately. "That I am. You want a tour?"

"Sure, that would be great¼ um¼ give me 20 minutes to get this delivered and call in."

"Sure. You know where to find me now."

"That I do. Ya, geek."

"Shove it, goober, and what's this I hear about you having unsafe sex?"

I blush. Cursing Jen, I flee from the room as fast as I can. God damn Jen and her big lawyer mouth.

- - - - -

I relax in the elevator, humming along to what I think is a Frank Sinatra song. I think back to what I overheard between Olivia and Ashley, resolving in my head that I had misunderstood. In all honesty I only got a bit of the conversation, although it was easy to jump to conclusions. What's to misunderstand about gambling with the Mob?

The bell dings and I jump to attention. The elevator opens, letting me into a large nice-looking office area. Looking around, I see lots of empty space and no people. I wander around for a minute before I give up and shout, "Hello! Anybody here?"

There's a muffled reply of what I think is "Back here." I wander down the hallway. I almost decide that I've picked the wrong direction when I see two large wooden doors that are cracked open. There's light spilling out onto the soft gray and blue carpet. Swinging right door open, I proudly announce, "I have a package for an Alexis Knight!" I trail off not so proudly and blink rapidly, taking in the people before me who are staring back at me with equal parts confusion and apprehension; it makes for a nice frothy blend that is resembling an Absurdist theatre piece. "Holy shit!" That was smooth. I don't think I'm getting a tip, but damn! "Holy shit!" I repeat just because the tip's a lost cause.

"Ms. Webster, nice to see you again. I trust you know that this is also a non-smoking area?"

I flush, my embarrassment of the other day coming back in full force.

"Jordan, honey, play nice."

Right, now I know who my sister was referring to when she says a bitchy Asian woman.

Jordan glares at me, crosses her arms in front of her chest, and stares at me as if I were a piece of trash on her shoe. So I ignore her and turn my attention to the blonde sitting next to her at the table. Holy shit! They were at the club dancing, or having sex standing up on the dance floor, which means Anna can't be too far away. Holy shit!

"Jordan, has the package arrived from the?"

Think of the Devil. Jordan's glaring at me, Anna's imitating a fish out of water, and the blonde is smiling. Apparently this is all very funny.

"Carmen!"

I feel like screaming. "Look, I have a package for an Alexis Knight,.(period) I'll deliver it and go."

"I'll take that."

I glare at Jordan and snatch it away before she can take it. "It's a well established fact that your name is Jordan."

The blonde gets up, smoothing down a rather short skirt. "That would be me."

"ID."

"Yes, of course." She smiles sweetly as if I hadn't said anything rude.

"Carmen, I'm going to advise you right now to get your eyes off my girl's legs," Jordan growls at me.

Flushing in embarrassment, I quickly raise my eyes. You can hardly blame me; they're nice legs, well, the skirt is very short. She's hardly uncomfortable with showing them off and having people look at them. It wasn't like I was going to touch them or take them for a test drive ¼ maybe later when I'm alone in my room. Grrrr¼ that was the sex fairies talking. They've been so quiet; I'd hoped they'd gone back to hibernation mode so they'd stop getting me into trouble.

Alexis hands me her ID. "It's okay. Carmen. It's flattering. Just ignore grumpy, she didn't get to go for her run this morning."

I smile weakly but keep Jordan in my line of sight at all times. "Okay, Ms. Knight, if you could just sign this." Giving a fake smile, I hand her the package. For a moment I feel awkward; everyone's gone quiet wondering what to do or say. I feel bad that I'm totally ignoring Anna, but some things are just a matter of survival. "Right then. I'll just be on my way." I start to edge towards the exit.

"Carmen, please. Can we talk?"

"I don't really¼" Crap, she looks like she's about ready to start crying. I bend like Gumby. "Sure."

She motions me into her office. I walk slowly into the room, giving Jordan a wide berth when she snaps her teeth at me. Bitch.

"Shut the door please."

Sure, the sex fairies are all sorts of perky about being alone with Anna. They see the big picture: the nice big desk, the thrill of being naughty with two people only a few feet away, and Anna is wearing glasses. The sex fairies find that very yummy. I'm not perky about this at all, and I'm on to the sex fairies and their need for immediate satisfaction. Not that satisfaction is a bad thing - the sex fairies bust in on my thoughts by reminding me that I know what Anna's sweat tastes like. Jesus! I think my knees wobbled.

"I called you. I called you repeatedly."

"Huh?" Anna's speaking to me, but the sex fairies are reminding me I know what Anna looks like without her clothes on and they're trying to convince me to try some visualization exercises right now.

"I said I called you."

"Right, called me¼" She has this mole right on her¼

"Jordan said you just stormed out. What the hell crawled up your ass?"

"Hold on." Screw the fairies. "Yes, I got your message, and yes, I was ignoring you."

"Was?"

"Does it look like I'm ignoring you now?"

"Right. If I hadn't pushed it, you would have slunk out of here without saying a word to me."

Oh, good point, grrrr. "So what? You made me feel like a slut. Who the hell doesn't leave a note after sleeping with someone and then sends their assistant to clean up the mess they left in the hotel room?"

"What the hell are you talking about? I sent Jordan because I was busy and I wanted to make sure you got taken care of."

"Right, and who makes a date with two women on the same night.?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Did you have 'coffee' with Jen as well?" I'm beginning to discuss my points rather loudly now; I swear I'm not yelling, yet.

"If you want to know if I fucked Jen, why don't you just come out and ask instead of playing with words?" Okay, she's discussing loudly too.

"Well, you seemed to enjoy playing with words and meaning a couple of days ago."

"God, you're such a child."

My jaw clenches and I'm sure the vein in the center of my forehead is visibly throbbing. "I am not a child." I say the sentence slowly, each word getting special attention.

"Then stop acting like one."

There it is again. "Fuck you!"

"No thank you, the first time was not worth repeating."

That hits a nerve. Game, set, and match to Anna. "With such cutting remarks, you and Jen will be a perfect couple." I turn to go. I can't stand to be in here, near her, for another moment.

It comes out softly; I barely hear it. "Shit. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

I frankly don't care at this moment; I just want to get far away before I start crying. A hand on my arm stops me. "Anna, let go of me." The hand pulls back harder as I try to move forward. "God damn it, let go!"

"No. Stop running away. Nothing gets resolved if you run away."

I turn to tell her to fuck off again, but there's something in her eyes when I catch them with my own. It's an unguarded look. It's all about raw pain buried deep, pain that settles in the soul and follows you through the years, the sort of pain that not even time and drink can solve. It touches me because it's honest and real. I know that I have the same pain deep inside; I can empathize. Instead of pulling away, I'm pulled into her. I frame her face with my hands and kiss her. I expect her to slap me, to laugh and reject me as a fool, but instead she welcomes me. Her hands slide down my body and then pull me tighter into her. We fumble and stumble backwards until we're stopped by her desk. Remembering to lift with my legs and not my back, I pick Anna up and place her on her desk. The damn sex fairies will get what they want. "Anna, for your sake I hope there's nothing important or sharp and pointy on your desk."

Fumbling behind herself with her hands, Anna insures that the stuff cluttering her desk crashes to the floor. Anticipating Jordan's reaction, she yells out, "Jordan, if you come in here I will kill you with the stapler."

I snicker. God, I'd love to see Jordan's face.

"Concentrate, Webster. I believe you made a threat to me about my desk, or was that just talk?"

I push her back on the desk; the small part of my brain not taken over by the sex fairies is divided. One part of that very small part hopes there are no security cameras in here, and the other part thinks this is a very bad idea. Someday I need to learn to listen to those parts. I hoist myself onto the desk, hoping I don't slip and fall. I don't have to worry; Anna grabs me by the shirt collar and pulls me to her for a heated kiss.

Clothes are sloppily removed; I nearly choke to death when Anna tries to rip my shirt off. Despite this, my hunger to touch Anna keeps me persevering. Shit. Buttons go flying. I hope that shirt wasn't too expensive, but Anna doesn't seem to care at the moment. God, that was cool, a total power trip. I am Carmen the mighty, bow before my shirt-tearing powers. Anna forces my head toward her breasts. Right, focus here, Webster. Look at that; it's all perky in anticipation of me nibbling on it. I give it a slow circular lick then a little nuzzle with my lips. From the nearly silent squeak that action causes, I take it that Anna approves. Fingers dig through my hair and into my scalp. I suck in a breath, mmmmm¹/₄ that rocks. I give a little whimper as a thrill shoots through my body with every clutch and pull of my hair. With my tongue I follow the curve of a breast down to a toned stomach and dip into her navel. As I withdraw my tongue, I give a quick nip to the flesh there, smiling to myself as I feel her suck in a breath. I continue down, skipping her clit to move to the inside of her thigh where I give a lick and a small bite as well.

Fuck! I'm seeing stars and I'm staring at the ceiling, you know, the carpet is as plush as it looks.

"Carmen?"

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

She's sitting up on the desk looking down at me.

"I, I think so. What happened?"

She flushes. "I'm, uh, ticklish on the inside of my knees."

It comes back to me. My right hand had trailed down her leg, lightly gripping her knee. It had jumped like a live wire, striking me in the chest. Looking down, I wonder if I will bruise.

"Want me to kiss it better?"

I pout and nod.

She slides off her desk and crouches over me; I lay back to enjoy the show. Her breasts bounce gently with her movement. In a move that would make yoga freaks jealous, she slides over me, her breasts traveling lightly over my skin, teasing me when she arches her back. Leaning up, I kiss each one until she slides back down. God, that should be illegal.

"Ah, ah. I'm supposed to be kissing you better."

"You took too long."

"So impatient."

"Teasing later," I grunt, pulling her down on top of me.

"Kay," she says with a wicked grin.

For the record, I tried really hard not to scream. However, I think they heard me on the first floor. As I'm coming back into the proper time zone, there's a knock at the door.

"Jordan, I swear I'll go for the stapler."

"Actually it's Alexis. We're going to head out for an early lunch. Too many distractions."

Kill me now. I bury my face in the crook of Anna's neck.

"Oh, okay. I'll talk to you two later."

"Okay. And, Anna, it better be much later, like tomorrow."

Anna brushes my sweaty hair out of my face. She seems hesitant, almost as if she feels guilty.

"I'm okay, really," I say, trying to reassure her. "I knew they were there and I still wanted to do this."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay^{1/4}"

She looks like she wants to say something else, but she remains quiet. I don't say anything; instead I just lightly rub circles on her back. "So you're a consultant."

"Yep."

"And you're consulting at MR on a missing money problem."

"Yeah."

I don't say anything else. The conversation I'd overheard between Olivia and Ash looks worse and worse, but still it's Olivia. Olivia would never do anything bad enough that Ash could control her. Plus Olivia would just run to Jen and Jen would whip Ash back into line. But as Hamlet once said, "Something is rotten in the State of Denmark," and it's not the cheese. Okay, cheese never really came into it, but it would have explained a lot. I'm missing a lot of the big picture at this moment; there are so many undercurrents swirling around that it's scary. I hug Anna tightly to me.

"What's up?" she whispers against my skin. I shiver.

"Nothing. Just thinking I'm sort of sorry about earlier."

"Me too." She kisses my collar bone.

"Anna."

"Yes."

"No more dates with Jen. If you make another date with her, I don't want to ever see you again."

She laughs, but as she raises up to look at my face the laughter fades away; as she can see how serious I am. "It wasn't a date. It was a business dinner. I needed to talk to her about some of the legal work she's done for MR."

"Anna, I don't care. If you have to talk to her about business, then you do it here^{1/4}" I pause, thinking about what we just did here. "With Jordan present^{1/4}" She laughs. "But if you go out to dinner, drinks, or anything with her, I'm gone."

"I thought you were friends? You, Jen, Olivia, and Ashley: the Musketeers - all for one and one for all."

I frown. "No, Jen, Olivia, and Ashley are the Musketeers. I'm just their tagalong."

"Ah, you're their D'Artagnan."

I laugh. "I don't think I rank that high."

"D'Artagnan was the fourth member. He was on the outside looking in; he repeatedly had to prove himself to the others until they finally excepted him. Then he became like a son. He reminded them of their purpose - why they were Musketeers."

My frown gets deeper as she speaks. "I'm not seeing a correlation."

"He was the noblest, believed strongly in right and wrong, in being a hero, and doing the right thing. When the time comes, you will do the right thing."

What the hell is she talking about? "When what time comes?"

"Anytime. I'm being metaphorical. But it's in your nature to do the right thing."

"I guess." For an after-sex talk, this is getting to be a bit deep.

She leans up on an elbow. Laughing, she smooths the wrinkles in my forehead. "Don't think on it too hard."

"Well, I can't help it. First, you short out my brain, and then you want to discuss the deeper meanings of literature."

"Hmmm, maybe you should silence me with a kiss."

"What? Oh." Who am I to argue?

- - - - -

I tuck my shirt into my shorts, trying really hard not to laugh as Anna picks up the buttons to her shirt. With each button she picks up her face scrunches into a cute little pout; I just want to kiss her. Finally she gets them all. Staring into her hand, she gives a little sigh and dumps them into the trashcan. The shirt follows. I give a little whimper at the sight of red lines on her shoulders. They'll be gone in the morning but right now they say, "Property of Carmen". Yes, it's shallow to think such thoughts but I'll live, and I'm certainly smart enough not to share them with Anna.

Reaching under her desk, she pulls out a gym bag. Unzipping it, she pulls out a T-shirt and slips

it on. She looks kind of silly.

"Not one word or I'll make you replace my shirt. It was silk, you know."

My eyes bug out. Oh shit. "Not a peep, trust me." As I take a step, a familiar weight hits my leg. Crap, work. I just had a whole lot of nookie on the clock.

My face must have paled. "Carmen, is everything okay?"

I pull out the phone. Fuck. Three messages. "I'm still on the clock. I've been AWOL for ¼" I look at the clock and wince. "¼ almost two hours."

I don't bother listening to the messages; I call work. "Hi, this is Carmen." I pull the phone away as I get blasted. Anna takes the phone out of my hand. "Hello? Yes, this is Ms. Russell. I wanted to call and thank you for sending such a patient employee. I had Alexis tied up in a meeting and Ms. Webster waited and wouldn't release the package into anyone else's hands. I knew I did the right thing using your company. Those documents are very important and very private. I'll be sure to talk you up to all my clients. Yes. No, thank you." She smirks and hands the phone back to me.

"Uh, yes, okay." I look at her as I hang up the phone.

"Yes, you may thank me."

"Can you possibly grasp how horny you just made me?"

She laughs. The sex fairies bow to their partners and begin to waltz; twirling, they spin around and around until I think I might just explode. "I really need to get back to work."

"Okay." She kisses me lightly on the cheek. "Dinner tonight?"

"Sure." I can hear her snicker as I walk stiffly out of the room.

In the elevator I have time to reflect. Reflection is never a good thing. What the hell just happened? I think one of those undercurrents sucked me under when I turned my back for a moment. Resting my head on the cool metal side, I remember Olivia is waiting for me. Poo. I reach out, hitting the button for the third floor, and then close my eyes. Life is moving too quickly for me; I can't keep up.

I slink up to Olivia's office. Quietly I knock on the door and walk in. Olivia looks up from a report. Her eyebrows scrunch in confusion then her eyes bug out. Ouch. Note to self - if that's what I look like when I do that, don't do it anymore.

"So the courier service is a full service business, is it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your shirt's inside out."

"Crap. Well, that would explain the funny looks." I strip it off and put it on right side out.

"Is that a love bite on your stomach?"

"No, it's a birthmark."

"Birthmark my ass. You lucky dog you. I've met Alexis and she's a hottie. I don't know how you managed it, but I salute you." Olivia stands and salutes smartly.

"Jerk."

"I suppose you don't have time for a tour."

I grin sheepishly and toe the floor. "Can I take a rain check?"

"Sure, goober."

"Thanks."

As I leave, she shouts, "If you see Alexis again, be sure to put in a good word for me."

"Uh huh."

In the lobby I stare at the portly guard who has set up a vigil over my bike. I hand my badge to the secretary. "Is he going to go all Clint Eastwood on my ass?"

She looks up. "Probably." She gives me a wink. "James." The guard perks up at his name. "I've got a Ms. Townsend on the line. She's locked herself out of her car. She's in Lot H. Can you help her or should I call someone else?"

"Uh, no. I'll be right there." He takes off.

"Wow. He's faster than I thought."

"Yeah, but he has a big crush on Ms. Townsend."

"Poor girl. Thanks."

"Hey, you've given me months worth of entertainment in just one morning."

For a moment I wig out, thinking that there were security cameras in Anna's office. Then I realize that she's talking about James and I's little standoff on bicycle safety.

"No problem, take care."

"You too." I unlock my bike and wheel it outside just in time to see James huffing and puffing his way back.

"You little shit, stop!"

God, that man can move. Hopping on, I peddle off as fast as I can. Dear Lord, I hope the rest of my day isn't as exciting.

Part 6

I shut the front door behind me and drop into the white plastic chair on the porch. My hair, still slightly damp from my shower, drips on to my ratty t-shirt as well as the worn wood of the porch. Digging through the ice in the cooler I pull out a beer and hand it to Ed. He twists the top off and hands it back.

He smirks at me. "Wimp."

I raise an eyebrow, then stare at his leg in puzzlement.

"What?"

"Nothing, but I think there's a ladybug on your shoe."

"What!"

He leaps out of the chair and does the dance of the creeped out. Sue and I laugh. "Wimp."

Realizing he's been had he grumbles and sits back down. He pulls out a pack and shakes out two cigarettes handing me one. I take it and search my pockets for a lighter, Ed laughs and hands me his. Damn thing has run off on me again. Lighting it I take a drag handing Ed back his lighter. Every Monday at three o'clock Sue, Ed, and I meet on the porch to unwind from our day, because Mondays are traditionally evil days. We sit out here rain or shine and watch life move by on the street. Ed is an RN at a nursing home. He works from three am to ten. He's made of stronger stuff than I, but he says he doesn't mind the job. He loves the patients on his floor and when one of them dies he's depressed for days. I think he's closer to them than most of them are to their own kids. Once he told me the best part about the job was the stories, that if you actually took the time to sit down and listen everybody has a story to tell, its like reliving history sometimes. Ed also told me one day he's going to open his head up and spill all those stories on to paper, I don't doubt it I know he majored in English. Sue also majored in English that's how she met Ed, I'm not sure how she met Rob I think it was at a party. Since Sue majored in English she is of course the morning manager of the local coffee shop The Beanery. She has no love of the job but it pays well. Rob works as a cook and he works all sorts of shifts but if he's home he joins us.

"So how was work?" Sue asks taking a sip of beer.

Ed grunts and I keep telling myself 'I will not blush' over and over again. "Fine."

"Anything exciting?"

"Caught an Nurse stealing patients' meds."

"Kick his ass?" I know how protective Ed is of his patients.

"Hardcore."

We grin at each other and clink beers.

"Carmen anybody throw a typewriter at you?"

"Not today. Almost got run over, but when do I not, and had to take a package to MR."

"You stop in and see your sis?"

"Yeah."

"You sound uncertain."

I laugh, "No I saw her, I, I, I just overheard something that has me puzzled and a little bit concerned."

"Well when you eavesdrop on other's conversations that's bound to happen."

I stick my tongue out at Sue. We ease into a comfortable silence watching people come home from work and kids come home from school. I try to stifle a yawn but I'm really worn out today. "I think I'm going to head in and take a nap or something."

""Kay. You do look a little tired, but I know how your family dinners can wipe a person out."

I giggle, so true. Standing I yawn and then give a big stretch.

"Hold it right there missy. What's that?"

I freeze hands over my head. "What's what?"

"That." Sue pokes my exposed stomach.

Oh crap, I forgot about that. "Um¼ a birthmark."

Ed coughs, "love rhino."

I turn glaring at him.

"That looks like a hicky and its on your stomach buster."

I blush, as I turn red Sue and Ed laugh. Giving up I sit back down in my chair covering my face with my hands.

"So do you want me to guess why you're sooooo tired today, cause I'm going to guess it has nothing to do with family dinner night."

I don't say anything.

"I can come up with lots of scenarios in my evil little mind. I can start telling you about them at any point¼"

I look up and see an evil glint in Sue's eye and I know any second she's going to start really embarrassing me. "Me, Anna, and a desk." I blurt out.

Ed chokes on his beer.

"See that wasn't so bad. The truth will set you¼ you and Anna¼ Are you serious?"

I just bury my face in my hands and nod.

"Whoa."

"Yeah what Ed said. Details girl, details. I promise none of this will go to Rob."

I tell them everything, well not everything they don't need me drawing diagrams of the positions we did, that's just not their business. I tell them because nothing got resolved, all the uncertainty and angst is still blasting around inside me. She's still leaving, we still had rabid horny rabbit sex all over her office, and I still feel like a schmuck on a personal level cause each time we have sex I can't say no. I can't talk about my fears and the fact I walk away from these encounters losing more of myself to her. When I finish spilling my guts, I instantly regret it. I had no right to drag them into it. Its my life and my mess. Sighing I sip my beer and sit back.

"Hmm." is all Ed says as he reaches in the cooler for another beer.

"You're becoming quite bold as you've become older. I can't believe you¼ with people in the next room¼ wow."

I almost tell them it was the sex fairies fault, but I stop myself because I realize it will make me sound insane.

"It's not all bad." Ed breaks in. "You set some boundaries."

"Huh?"

"He has a point. You clearly stated that you would not put up with her seeing Jen outside of work."

I pout, "but I'm supposed to be the only one who understands Edspeak."

Sue laughs, "Carmen, hun, I use to work in childcare before I moved up to making mochas. I can decipher the most mumbled of speech."

"Fine." I throw up my hands.

They laugh at me and I grin back.

"We're just proud you got laid. Regardless of how you got laid you were going to freak out on yourself and the girl who laid you."

"Jesus Sue. That's so crude."

She sighs, "Yep, people forget girls can be that way. But you know I'm right."

Ed answers for me, "yep." They clink beer bottles.

"Carmen enjoy it, but don't be a doormat. When the time comes for her to leave talk about your relationship. What's the worse that could happen, you follow her to New York and be her love slave?"

I blush. It has a certain amount of appeal, if I want to jump ahead, way ahead in our relationship, that has everything to do with just sex. "I - I couldn't just leave."

"Why not? I think, and I'm sure Ed would back me here, the best thing you could do would be to get the hell out of this town."

"Here, here." Ed agrees.

"What and leave guys to your own devices."

Looking at each other we start to laugh.

"Okay guys I need a nap. All the analyzing the last few days has worn me out. Wake me up if Anna calls she mentioned something about dinner."

"Sure will do."

I dump the inch of lukewarm beer into the sink and toss the bottle into the re-cycling. Yawning I stretch again smiling I rub the love bite on my stomach. The smile fades as I make my way to my room. I really need to somehow override the sex fairies so I can have an actual conversation with Anna. Once those pesky fairies get involved all thinking is over.

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I'm not really surprised to find myself standing on the edge wind whipping my hair around and the smell of rain on the air. I can hear the trees swaying and the high schoolers yelling and laughing. Something grabs my ankle, startled I jerk back and look down to find a bloody hand wrapped around my ankle. Another hand comes up grabbing the dirt and brush then Heidi is pulling herself up. I sigh and resign myself to her bloody decomposing corpse, she looks up at me her blue eyes searching mine.

"What?"

"A little help."

"Why should I? fine." I help her up. She brushes herself off I ignore the dirt and worms that land on the ground next to us. I wait for an arrogant retort but she just stands there in silence.

I begin to fidget. "Why are we here?" I finally give in and break the silence.

"Because this is important."

"It's not important it's depressing."

"Don't you remember this?"

"Of course I do."

"Not really, it's there but it's warped and twisted because you refuse to see it for what it really is."

"Then what is this?"

"Truth. Yours, mine, and everybody else who's connected. The night I died do you remember it?"

"Of course I do. How could I forget something like that?"

"Then tell me about it! every detail."

"Fine, it was a, a, a cloudy fall night. The high school kids had come up here to party and you invited me to meet you up here."

"No."

"No. What do you mean no?"

"It wasn't cloudy, there was a full moon out!" The sky changed it became clear and a full moon shined down illuminating everything in soft tones.

"and it was spring not fall." The trees changed color turning into a soft green from vibrant reds and yellows.

"I didn't invite you up here you came with Olivia, Jen, and Ashley. Why would I invite you up here? They had caught us making out the day before in the music room and threatened my very life if I ever came within 20 feet of you again."

I turned away from her violently my eyes wildly roaming the clearing looking for anything that seemed familiar even my own memories were treacherous. "I, I, came up here and my sister noticed you and drug you off to, to, to yell at you. I ran because everybody was staring at me and then Jen looked at me, she was pitying me. I came here to get away from everyone and you found me?" It came out as a question. I saw a younger me run into the clearing long dark hair near tears the young me just stood there, so lost in the center of the clearing, staring at the moon and then she came out of the shadows, so confident so cool, with her leather jacket and her blonde hair.

"You had a mullet I had forgotten that."

"Well if I had gotten to grow older I would have eventually realized how uncool it was."

I smiled at that, then remembered who I was conversing with and it fell away.

She draped the jacket over my shoulders and took my arm and we walked coming closer and closer to the edge. Heidi laughed at me and promised she'd keep me from going over the edge. Then she kissed me, I didn't try to stop her. Disgusted with my younger self I turn away.

"Not quiet the monster you remember me to be?"

"I was 13. You were what 16? I still think that was pretty sick of you now, even if I wasn't smart enough to realize it then."

Suddenly there is a horrible noise and shouting, but I can't look.

"You really should see this."

"No!" I put my hands over my ears. I want to scream. Make it stop. Make this whole horrible

dream stop. I won't look, I can't look because¹/₄ because¹/₄ I know it will be awful and the truth of it will shatter my soul. Somehow I know this and I keep my back turned on that night. If I see it, if I truly make myself comprehend that night, I know the truths that make my foundation will crumble. Heidi's voice is whispering in me head telling me that until I remember the this night everything remains frozen inside me I'll never grow up I'll never be a real person, I will just continue on stuck in this moment having it haunt my dreams and subconscious until I break. Fear makes my heart hammer, it pounds a dark rhythm in my chest. Slowly I remove my hands from my ears minutes have passed and the clearing is silent. Unable to stop myself I turn around and see the younger me and Olivia, Heidi is gone. I am crouched on the ground staring in terror over the edge of the cliff as Olivia stands over me. Straining my hearing I hear Olivia say, "Carmen what have you done?"

With a scream I leave my dream and jerk up right in my bed. "Oh fuck." I killed her this is what my brain has been trying to tell me. I, I, oh God is this what Olivia protects me from. The knowledge of myself.

"You okay?"

Who the hell? Looking up there's someone sitting on the edge of my bed. How did I not notice them? My room is dark wrapped in shadows, a faint light coming in from the now open bedroom door highlights the person on my bed.

"Hey it was just a bad dream. Its okay now."

They turn their head just an inch to the right - blue eyes. Somehow I've dragged Heidi's ghost out of my nightmares into reality. Fear, basic fear, propels me out of my bed and as far away as I can get from her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I babble it out over and over again, then sobs come racking my body. What do you say to the person you shoved over a cliff? They don't make Hallmark cards for that kind of sorry.

Hands wrap around me and pull me into a warm body that feels very much alive and I'm surrounded by the smell of lilacs. "Anna?"

"Yes."

"It's you."

"Of course. Who else would I be?"

"A ghost."

She laughs, "no ghosts here."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Just one tired, yet hungry consultant."

"Oh." I just really need to be cuddled at the moment and I burrow into Anna's arms, not really caring why she's here or how she got into my room.

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I stare into the mirror, water drips down my nose and splashes into the white porcelain sink. I sent Anna back to the kitchen with the others. Told her I just needed a minute to freshen up and wake up, she seemed hesitant to leave me. That gesture warmed my heart more than any round of sweaty nude bedroom aerobics we could ever partake in. She does care about me. Wiping my face with a towel I catch my eyes in the mirror. So those are the eyes of a killer? I can't be a murderer I don't feel like one. God I was only 13, maybe it was an accident, sweet innocent 13 year olds don't kill people. It had to have been an accident. I need to talk to Olivia she was there¹/₄ God why hasn't she talked to me about this before. My face mocks me it looks so innocent and sweet but it's a killers face. Pull it together Carmen, its like the conversation you overheard this morning, you only got parts of it a big chunk is still missing. I feel somewhat better but my stomach rolls and jerks.

Coming into the kitchen I smile at Ed who is tossing the salad at Rob who is flicking chicken marinade at Ed. I don't see Anna and my smile staggers, did I imagine her? Maybe I did, maybe she was never really there. God am I losing my mind?

"Hey Car what's up? You look lost."

"I think I'm losing my mind I thought Anna was in my room."

"Oh she's here. Her and Sue are bonding on the porch. Us male types have been sent inside to forage for food."

Ed makes grunting noise behind Rob. Rob flicks more sauce at Ed.

"Are we grilling chicken or Ed?"

"I'm sure Ed wouldn't mind being slathered in sauce and thrown to a pack of lesbians." You can just see Rob waiting for the laughter he knows his joke is going to cause, but you want to wince cause the joke isn't that funny.

All Ed says is "Dude." and dumps the bowl of salad over Robs head leaving the bowl resting on Robs head. It covers his eyes and Rob mutters, "was it something I said?"

"Yep. Jokes should come naturally and not be forced."

"Fine. Everyone's a critic."

I make my way outside. A little frightened that I will find Sue giving Anna the third degree, and even more terrified that I'll find them best buddies. Opening the door I poke my head out and find them heads tilted together in some sort of conspiracy. A sisterhood that only the truly feminine can understand. Olivia, Ashley, Jen and I have more of a fraternity going on. And I know I should be terrified.

Just as I have reached my decision to run for the hills, Anna looks up and catches me with those blue-eyes of hers, she smiles and beckons me to her. I give her a goofy smile and go to her. I slide on to the porch railing behind her and she leans her head back onto my thigh smiling up at me. All I can think of is 'what dream?'

"So I take it Anna called?"

Sue laughs at me. "Yep."

"But you didn't wake me up for her call."

"Nope. I thought she should come over and experience a little bit of your world."

"You wanted to give her the third degree."

Sue laughs, "and that too."

"I'm sorry Anna."

Anna pats my leg, "its okay. You just have some good friends."

"I do, don't I."

"Yes, there a little more real than your Musketeer buddies."

"Uh huh." I slip my feet on to the armrests of Anna's chair. However, Anna's comment has caused a bout of reflection. I do have two very good friends in Sue and Ed, and well then there's Rob. When I think about close knit friends I think of Olivia, Jen, and Ashley, but how many times have Ed and Sue been there for me. Mentally I slap myself around, 'Jesus Car, grow up and stop taking people for granted.'

"They're a lot more true than my Musketeer buddies." I'm not sure why I blurted it out but when I see Sue's happy yet watery smile, I know I did a good thing. Maybe I do need to grow up. I lean forward and kiss the top of Anna's head. It is a little weird to have her here invading my territory, I've never really invited a girl over before into my space, I think I was too busy waiting for the other shoe to drop and to find her and Jen wrapped up in some intimate embrace. I find that it's

not as scary as I thought it would be to share my private space.

"Hey girls!" Sue glares at Rob. "I mean fully developed women, who are far more wise and intelligent than I."

I snicker.

"Dinner is ready so come eat."

Dinner was great and everyone was well behaved for being the ill mannered barbarians that they are. Some how over the course of the evening I got up the courage to ask Anna to spend the night. Oh trust me the sex fairies were all happy about that. They were planning a little circus of delights, but while the fairies might have been willing emotional me wasn't. I poured some rain on the little bastards circus. Anna I think was surprised as well that I didn't want to talk about things, and I didn't want to have lusty girl on girl sex. I just wanted to snuggle. I just didn't want to feel alone.

I'm staring at the ceiling. I can't sleep I tried counting sheep until they begged me to stop so they could rest for a while. I've never had someone in my bed before and the invasion of space is a little much to get use to. Also there's that little uncertain fear rolling around in the back of my head that I may or may not be a killer. I resolve in my mind that I need to talk to Olivia. Rolling over I snuggle into Anna's shoulder smelling the scent of lilacs, breathing it in it flows into me soothing me and my eyelids grow heavy and I slip into sleep.

I never got around to talking to Olivia its almost been a week. It rests on the back of my mind and I try to ignore its there. I don't feel like a killer that's the one thing I keep reflecting on. Although I'm not really sure how it would feel to be a killer I'm just certain that I can't be one. However, a part of me knows all I have to do is ask Olivia and I would know everything, but something stops me each time I start to get my nerve up. Something in the back of my head tells me I don't want to know the truth, because it will be ugly and painful.

Things with Anna remain for the most part in the horny rabbit stage, all I can say is that there only a few place left in town where we haven't had sex. Yesterday she told me she couldn't come over today, and she was being all dodgy when I asked her why not. All she told me was 'things are coming to a head.' That made me all gloomy, that means her work here is almost done and she'll be leaving me. I knew it was coming but still, it sucks. It sucks on so many levels but the

big one is I have yet to tell her I've completely fallen for her. I think I'm still waiting for that other shoe to drop.

Its Sunday and I'm pouting on the porch. I tried to read but the words kept swimming and staying out of focus. The day is nice and I'm bored out of my mind. I have fled the house as Rob and Sue are making up for working opposite schedules most of the week and Ed at work covering for someone. The phone rings breaking me from my pouting. I answer hopeful that its Anna, its not its Kevin.

"Hey Carmen, where have you been hiding yourself?"

I feel mildly guilty that I've been ignoring the poor confused boy.

"Nowhere."

"Uh huh. So is your clit worn out?"

"I-I-I can't believe you said that to me." My face turns bright red.

"Yeah but you didn't deny it so I'm also guessing you're a nice shade of red right now."

"What do you want butthead?"

"Nothing. You know what tonight is?"

'Yeah the night the sex fairies get to pout.' What I say is, "no."

"It's a full moon. You up for some midnight madness up at the grotto?"

Oh man we haven't done midnight madness in forever. "Yes!." I whoop out. "We haven't done that in forever."

"So you game?"

"Oh yeah. You're a lifesaver I thought I was going to die of boredom."

"Hey what are best buds for."

"And you are the best."

"That I am. I'll pick you up at 10ish?"

"You betcha." Hanging up I go pull my beloved bike from the house and ride it down to the gas station to check the tires.

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God its beautiful up here. We're crashing up and down the trails and with the full moon striking the earth it might as well be daytime. I'm following Kev up the trail at the fork he takes a left speeding up. "Kev!" I yell. That way goes to the cliff and where the high school kids party, its dangerous and I so don't want to be there right now.

He continues on like he doesn't hear me, in fact the bastard speeds up. "Kevin!" I shout again. He seems to go even faster. I concentrate on catching up so I can kick his ass for being so stupid. He goes over a small hill and I lose him. I come down the hill and skid to a stop, I try to catch my breath so it will stop drowning out all other noise. Listening I don't hear anything. I scan the shadows of the trees and trails looking for his bike light. Nothing. When I catch him he's a dead man. I almost swallow my tongue when I realize that if Kev kept on this trail he'll come right to the cliff. "Bastard." I mutter to myself. I pray that I haven't lost another person to that thing. Setting off on a slower pace I go up another small hill as I reach the top I see a light coming from the clearing ahead. Speeding up I coast down yelling for Kevin one more time. Bursting into the clearing I'm blinded. Clamping onto my breaks I nearly send myself flying. Coughing in the dust I hold my hand up to shield my eyes. There's no Kevin, but there are some other people, "Anna? Jordan?"

Anna smiles sadly at me and Jordan refuses to even meet my eyes.

"Carmen could you step over there and join your sister and Jen." Its not a question really. I turn and see Olivia and Jen. Olivia looks scared and Jen looks annoyed. Puzzled I feel my forehead crinkle in confusion, "Um!¼ what's going on?"

"Carmen." Jen barks at me. "Just do as the insane lady says."

'Insane?' This is all very surreal. What happened to Kev? How did they all get up here? Why are they up here? I know my sister and Jen hate exercise that doesn't come from the bedroom. "What is going on? You all didn't do a bunch of drugs did you?"

"Carmen go stand over there." Anna orders. Oh that makes the sex fairies all happy they love it when Anna gets all authoritarian. The little bastards really want to see her in a leather dominatrix outfit maybe with a little whip. I've totally zoned out, caught up in the scene the sex fairies have created.

"Carmen don't make me say it again."

"What?" I so wasn't paying attention. She motions me to back up only this time she waves me over with the hand holding the gun. Even though I told my body to never do it again my eyes bug out of my head, 'Holy Shit!' I've been having rabid horny rabbit sex with an insane person.

I let go of the bike and slowly back up into Jen and Olivia. I'm scared, and pissed at myself. Only I would choose to fall in love with a loony. If I live through this I seriously have to rethink my taste in women. I finally bump into something and give a start as hands wrap around my waist. Jen whispers in my ear that it's her and that everything is going to be okay. I look back at her my eyes wide in fear, "how is it going to be okay? We're in the middle of nowhere and she has a gun."

"Trust me."

"Are you insane?" She shrugs in a manner that is less than convincing. I look to Olivia and find her hiding in Jen's shadow, I consider how odd it is that her last moments look like a metaphor for her life.

"Shut up!" Anna yells.

I jump, Olivia jumps, and Jen just gives a small smile. She whispers to me, "that Anna chick she's all yours you can have her."

I roll my eyes. God we're going to die and she's still being a jackass.

"We're just waiting for one more person to show." Anna says grimly.

I fidget nervously my mind flashes from thought to thought but won't stay focused I and I think I might faint.

"Bend over and put your head between your knees."

"What?" I look at Jordan. "Why is she being nice?"

"You're having a panic attack. Bend over before you faint." Her eyes meet mine and I see worry and concern there.

"Okay." I do what she says I nearly fall over but Jen catches me. I start to feel better as I stand back up I hear footsteps coming towards us. Suddenly Ashley bursts through the trees her hands are in front of her face following close behind is the blonde, Alexis. 'Hail, hail the gangs all here.'

Ash stumbles, "Hey baby I'm all for kinky on our second date but you think I can take the blindfold off?"

"Sure babe." Alexis mocks her.

Ashley takes off the blindfold blinks for a moment then says, "Whoa."

"Over by your friends." Anna shows the gun and Ashley slinks over like a whipped puppy.

"What the hell is going on?" Jen barks.

"Ms. Bridgewater please shut up. You're hardly in the position to question me."

Jen stiffens but goes quiet.

"However, we are here for answers."

"Answers about what?" I ask. I think one of those swirling undercurrents just turned into a whirlpool. I can feel my hands shake with fear. I have a sinking feeling in my gut I know what this is about.

"The truth. The truth about a spring night long ago when you were in high school and a young girl named Heidi Whitman died."

The shaking leaves my hands traveling up my body with a fierce cold front.

"What the hell do you care?" Olivia blurts out.

"I care very much. Heidi was my hero¼"

"Some hero she was a bitch¼"

"Shut up! What do you know. Heidi took care of me made sure I got food and that I did my homework¼"

"Why would that selfish bitch do that for you?"

"She was my sister."

I think we are all stunned by this but I'm not. Her eyes have been trying to show me the truth for so long, they're Heidi's eyes. I suddenly understand that pain I saw in her eyes in that one unguarded moment. For a moment I feel so sad for her, then the fear returns¼ oh god I killed her sister.

"She didn't have a sister did she?" Ashley questions

"Yeah she did she would have been Carmen's age. But she was fat with red hair and blue¼"
Olivia trails off really seeing Anna, "oh God."

"She can't be Heidi's sister her last name is Russell not Whitman."

I wince Ashley can be a little slow.

"After my sister's murder my mother moved away and remarried Jordan's father I took his last name."

"Well that explains why she's willing to help you kidnap four innocent people." Jen snarls.

"You all were there that night. You all are hardly innocent. So now we come full circle and return to the scene of the crime and maybe somebody's memory will clear itself."

Jen calmly moves the moment on, "Nobody killed your sister she killed herself."

"Lair! She wouldn't have done that, not to me. She was all I had our mother was worthless, and she was the one who took care of me."

"Well let me just breakdown your hero for you. She was a bully, an extortionist, and liked to take advantage of younger girls." Jen broke in savagely.

I'm not so sure what Jen is doing is a wise idea, Anna is getting more and more agitated. I can just imagine that gun going off and someone else dying in this cursed place.

"You lying bitch!"

"Am I? Just ask Carmen."

Everybody looks at me and I just squirm. My head begins to ache and my vision swims. I don't want to go back into the past, although the present is pretty scary right now. "Stop it!" I shout.

"Car!" Anna's voice is sweet, "please tell me I need to know. I need to know everything."

"No you don't." I'm almost sobbing now.

"Go on Carmen. Tell the crazy person how you started tutoring Heidi and how we eventually caught her one day in the music room kissing you and touching you."

"Shut up Jen!" I crumble to the ground as my head threatens to spill open.

"Carmen is that true?"

"Tell her about how noble and good her sister was."

"Carmen please. I need to know what happened."

"Tell her about how we threatened her if she ever came within 20-feet of you again."

"Jen leave my sister alone. Don't make her relive that." Olivia's voice breaks in fierce. Olivia cradles me and I cry into her arms. "Jen just shut up."

Jen just keeps going oblivious to the land mine she's about to set off. "Tell her how Heidi just couldn't stay away and how she cornered Carmen out her in the clearing and how Olivia found them and threatened to tell the police what that bitch was doing with her sister and faced with

owning up to her actions she jumped rather than face up to her shit."

I'm crying now the pain in my head near epic proportions I feel like Athena herself might spring from it.

"Is that what happened? Please Carmen I need to know."

"Of course it is." Olivia and Ash chime in.

While I respond with a croaked out, "I don't know."

"God she left a note. What more do you need?" Ashley breaks in.

Anna calms down composing herself at the mention of the note she looks smug. "Ah yes the note. The note is a fake."

"What?" all of us are stunned

"Yes, even at 13 I knew my sister hadn't written that suicide note and a few years ago I had the police open up the files and send it to a hand writing expert. It wasn't a match."

"That's not possible." Olivia breaths out in a strained voice.

"Oh it is but you want to know whose handwriting it matched." Its like a train wreck we have to watch her lips for the answer even though I know we don't want it.

"It matched yours Olivia."

"How the hell did you get a writing sample? Plus it was years ago my hand writing has changed since then."

"You'd be amazed what teachers hold on too and what is kept in permanent record for years and years."

Anna has a dangerous glint in her eyes, she's caught something and she's not going to let it go.

I push away from Olivia getting to my feet I ask, "Is this all about revenge?" My voice is quiet yet it carries on the wind.

Anna blinks. "Mostly."

"So everything that has happened has been a well played fact finding mission?"

She won't look me in the eye and I have my answers. "So did you fuck all of us and have your friends whore for you just for the truth?"

"No, yes¼ no its not like that."

My voice is getting stronger, I just heard the other shoe drop, but I'm use to being in this hurtful place of betrayal.

"Of course it is. Its just like that. Is it worth it?"

"If I find my sister's killer then yes it is!"

That shuts me up, that killer is very likely to be me.

Anna turns to Olivia gun loosely pointing at her chest. "So Olivia, tell me about that note."

I can see Olivia's eyes dart nervously around, she's avoiding, I can tell. "I don't know what to tell you. It happened just like Jen said."

"So you were there Jen. You saw it happen?"

"Of course she did." Olivia snaps.

"Uh, no¼ no I didn't. You told me what happened, but asked me not to bring it up because Carmen was so upset. Carmen didn't speak or do anything for two-weeks just sat in her room. We took care of her." Jen seems puzzled and she stares critically at us. "I was the last one to the cliff."

Anna sighs, "You know I would have bet money you pushed my sister. You're always the cold one, the one whose always using people for your pleasure and then discarding them without a second thought. Even your friends. How many times have you called Olivia over cause you have an itch you need scratched then kicked her out? The whole time ignoring the fact she's still in love with you."

"That's not true." Jen says dazed.

"Or all the times your friends had a girlfriend you wanted, so friendship be damned you seduced them away."

"No its not like that." Jen hastily defends herself.

If I didn't feel so miserable I'd applaud Anna she saying things I always wanted too.

"Oh its just like that. You're a praying mantis fucking and decapitating your way through your friends."

"Now hold on¼"

"Then there's Ashley. She likes to gamble and fuck every willing body she can get her claws

into. Then when the money is gone she just calls Olivia for a cash advance to keep her going. When Olivia's not fast enough and the mob wants the money she owes them they make Ashley do a little favor or they'll take a payment out of her flesh. You work as an accountant for the prison how convenient and its amazing the amount of drugs getting into the local correctional facility."

Ash glares back defiantly, "so."

"But what I want to know," Anna continues, "is what you know about Olivia that she doesn't want anybody else to know. I want to know what horrible secret you know that Olivia, the model employee, will skim money from the company that she has faithfully served for years to pay you off."

Olivia's eyes dart frantically around.

My mind starts to whirl everything coming together piece by piece and when her eyes hit mine I almost cry for her at the fear and loathing I see in my sister's eyes."

"Come on Olivia what dirt does Ashley have on you? Why is your handing writing on the note?"

"I-I-I" she stammers.

"Me."

Its quiet I can hear the crickets chirp. All eyes are on me, and I want to vomit. "She's protecting me. Aren't you Olivia?"

"Why would she protect you? Carmen you're the one person in all of this that hasn't done anything wrong." Anna's voice is soothing, almost a caress, but whatever we had is very dead now.

"Because I pushed Heidi over the edge."

Its silent for a moment, then everybody but Ash and Olivia bust out, "What?"

"She's right." Ash confirms what I've been afraid of.

I look to Olivia but she won't look at me she just stares at the ground. 'Oh Olivia what have I put you through.' I want to cry again but I feel oddly detached from my emotions.

Ashley speaks up. "We came up her for a party and when Olivia spotted Heidi she just snapped she didn't want that bitch anywhere near her sister again. She comes back from yelling at her to again stay away from Carmen, and we notice that Carmen's gone and that Heidi hasn't come back. Expecting the worse we split up to look for Carmen. Olivia found them first then I came into the clearing Heidi and Carmen were fighting. Olivia yelled at Heidi to get away from her sister and Carmen got a good push in and Heidi went over the edge. We came up with the suicide

note to protect Carmen."

'Oh God. OhGodohgodohgod. I am a killer.' I sink to the ground. All of this was a game. I feel so hallow so much is going on.

"Olivia is this true?"

Weakly Olivia mumbles, "yes."

Oh shit, how well I don't really know myself.

"Carmen?"

"I don't remember that night. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I start crying saying 'I'm sorry' over and over.

"Carmen I need this I need closure what happened to my sister!" She's shouting at me waving the gun around.

"Anna." Jordan barks out trying to settle her step-sister down.

"If they say it happened that way then it must have." My arms are wrapped around my legs and I'm sobbing now.

"There's no fucking way Carmen pushed Heidi over the edge of that cliff." Jen snaps me out of my hysteria.

She's glaring at Ashley and my sister. "Carmen was what all of 70 pounds of geeky muscle."

"Well I was shocked." Ashley backs herself up.

But there's something in the tone of her voice that sets off my warning bells, there's something false crawling all over her speech. Suddenly I remember my dream. I stand up in a daze and in a hallow voice replay what my memories have been trying to tell me. "I needed to get away you all were so mad at me. So I came here to get away and Heidi was here and we talked and it was cold so she gave me her jacket. We walked closer to the edge but I was scared, but she promised to protect me. Then¼"

"Then what?" Anna almost screamed.

"Carmen don't." Olivia warns me.

"Then¼" I stagger as pain lances into my skull, but then pain vanishes somehow I've pushed past the barriers I've placed on myself. "Then you came. Shouting at us. Yelling at me for being a whore and stealing your girlfriend." In horror I whisper, "It was you Olivia."

I'm back in that night and Olivia comes tearing down on us like some sort of vengefully

Goddess. Heidi for all her macho bravo just smirks, calling Olivia a cold fish and me very trainable. My stomach turns they are yelling and I just try to become small. Olivia pushes Heidi and her foot catches on a rock sending her over the edge. Olivia turns on me screaming, "Carmen what have you done? This is all your fault you stupid girl, if it wasn't for you none of this would have happened. Its always about you. God you're so fucking special. Olivia why can't you be smart like Carmen? Olivia why can't you be quiet and nice like your sister? The one thing that I have that we can't possibly share and you steal that too. You bitch!" Olivia pushed me and I fell back hitting my head.

I vomit as the memory washes over me. Shaking I pull away from there comforting hands. "You were going to let me¼" I stare at my sister in disgust, she was going to let me continue on thinking I had done this horrible act. All of them have spent a lifetime betraying me and let me live a life where I continuously betrayed myself. They were going to let me take the blame for it all.

Olivia whispers something like "I'm sorry." She comes towards me as if she wants to comfort me.

"No don't touch me!" I scream. I'm not thinking anymore I'm just reacting. I can't face them: all of them liars. Anna yells for me and I can hear Jordan telling her to leave me alone that she's done enough damage. What would it matter, fucking me was just about revenge. Being with me wasn't ever about me it was about helping her get closer to the people who ruined her world. What's worse I can't decide false love, false friendship, or a false family. Grabbing my bike I take off as fast as I can. I need to create as much distance as I can from this horrible place.

I ride all the way home numb and lost. Somewhere during the bike ride home it hits me that Kev was in on it with her, with Anna. He lured me up there, he encouraged me to explore this thing between Anna and I. That is the last straw I shatter and blow away leaving a ghost behind. Everything for so long has been a lie: friendship, love, and family. I leave my bike on the grass and vomit on the porch steps. I am nothing, Carmen doesn't exist she was created by a lie when she was 13. I stumble into my bathroom and pass out.

Time has no meaning I lay on the tile of the bathroom feeling despair cloud everything until blackness coats me. I stagger to my feet and try to wash my face and rinse the bile from my mouth. I stare at my reflection trying to find me inside but Carmen doesn't exist everything she thought was real was only a lie. All of them betrayers and she the worst for believing their promises of love and comfort. I am so disgusted with myself. I raise a fist and smash it again and again into the glass mirror of the medicine cabinet. Glass shatters spearing my hand, blood drips, but I don't feel it because I can't feel anything, because I'm not real. Then surprisingly my hand smashes through, stunned I stand there then twist it out of the hole I made. I don't feel the glass cut deep into my wrist and when I pull it out I can just stare at it stupidly as the blood bubbles thickly out. Weakly my legs give out and I crumble to the floor. I watch it pulse in time with my heartbeat. Part of me knows this is bad and screams for me to run for the phone but my legs are so weak. Everything is tunneling into gray nothingness.

"Hey kid."

"Hey. Where is everybody?"

"The sun has risen and they've fled, and so should have you."

"What's the point of the truth if it destroys?"

"Fire destroys as well but through destruction comes purification."

"So whose truth did I find?"

"Everybody's now they have to deal with themselves and their actions and not pretend they happened to somebody else."

"Good. I'm tired."

"You need to wake up."

"No I don't think so." Sure waking up sounds good in theory but I know pain lies in the waking body.

"The pain will get better."

"Are you really her? Or are you a part of me?"

"Does it matter?"

"No I guess not." I yawn and lean back against a tree watching the sun set in the grotto.

Part 7

There's a beeping noise. It's got a good rhythm but I couldn't dance to it. I open my heavy eyelids to find myself in a hospital room. I haven't got a clue how I got here. A dull throbbing radiates up from my wrist and it comes back to me, the mirror and the blood. Oh God. I almost died. The white curtain parts and a young man in a white coat enters.

He blinks for a moment. "Oh good, you're awake. There's a horde of people waiting outside to see you. Also a resident psychiatrist will be down later today to talk to you. Now let me look at that wrist."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Doctor Schroedinger."

I guess that means he's qualified to look at my booboo.

He makes some tsking noises. "Well, it looks good. You're very lucky that your roommate heard all that noise and went to check on you. You could have bled out and died."

I feel myself grow paler.

"Take deep breaths; don't faint on me here."

I do as the doctor orders.

"You okay?"

I nod. "I think so."

"Good. Shall I send your family in?"

"No."

He pauses, looking at me with concern.

"I think it's best if I don't see them."

"They're all very worried."

"Yeah, but they're a big part of my problem."

He nods but doesn't say anything. I give him the names of the only two people I want to see right now: Ed and Sue.

He leaves and I hear my mother shouting something in Spanish. For the first time I'm happy that I have no clue what she's saying. The next time I wake up there are tons of flowers, cards, and Ed. He looks at me, half worried and half relieved.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Everything is a lie." I feel tears gather in my eyes.

"What?"

"Friends, family, love¼ even me. I'm a lie."

"Hey now. You're the realist chick I know."

I give him a watery smile.

"How can I make this better, Car?"

"I want to leave."

"You can go home when the Doc says so."

"No, I want to leave here. I can't live here anymore. I need to go somewhere else and learn who this Carmen person is." I know I sound insane but Ed just nods his head and seems to follow me.

He smiles and says, "Kay."

- - - - -

I was in that stupid hospital for two weeks under a suicide watch. While in the hospital I received a thick letter from Anna. I threw it in the trash without opening it. I have no interest in her side of things or apologies or whatever else may be in that letter. She thoroughly fucked me over; at first it was in a good way but in the end it was in a mean, selfish, lying way. Jen tried to see me several times but could never get in. She sent flowers and they went in the garbage as well. Sue broke down while visiting me on my third day in the hospital, telling me that Olivia and Ashley were in prison awaiting trial for embezzling funds from MR Tech. I just stared at her funny and then started crying. I don't know why I was crying. My sister had totally screwed up my life and let me think that I was a cold-blooded murderer. Sue and I hugged each other and cried the afternoon away. I think she was crying for me but I haven't got a clue what I was crying for. Right before I was going to be released I finally told Sue and Ed the whole story. We had to dog pile Sue to keep her from flying to New York to kick Anna's ass. The day I got released from the hospital Ed picked me up in a big old moving truck. On the way out of town I called my jobs and explained why I was never coming back to work.

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It's two years later and it feels like a decade away from where I used to be. We live in Seattle now. By we I mean Sue, Ed, and me. Sue moved up about eight months after Ed and I got here. She and Rob split up and, at a loss of what to do, she stalked us here. Ed has a cousin who lives

in the Emerald City and she helped us out tons. I love it here. The rain, the gloom, - the place is moody just like me. The rocky beaches with the crashing waves - I could stand there all day and watch the waves pound onto the pier on a blustery day.

The rain does put a damper on riding my bike but it's okay. Public transit and I have become good friends, but on the occasional day that the sun peaks out you can find me tearing up and down the hills of Seattle. Ed easily got a job as a RN and he's writing the novel he always threatened to write; it's loosely titled 'Tales of the Forgotten'. Sue is dating a cook from the fish house she works at down on the pier; I think she has a thing for cooks. She and Rob are still good friends, but I'm glad to see she's moved on. I finally decided to go back to college to study music. Who knows? I'll probably end up a band teacher. I work part-time at record shop up on Capital Hill. Can I just say yummy? The Hill is the gay district. All I have to say is I fall in lust on a daily basis. Ed and I also play in a jazz band that plays a few weekday nights at a yuppie bar down in Pioneer Square.

Life is good and I'm really happy, happier than I ever was at home. I just didn't realize it until I got away. I do see a therapist; it's only once a month now but in the beginning Ed made me see one twice a week. There are no more sex fairies. I miss the little guys, but as my therapist has said over and over again, after Heidi's death a big part of my inner being stayed a 13-year-old little girl. Well, actually she said it using bigger words that were interwoven with psychobabble. Sex fairies were a product of that experience and allowed me to create a safe way to explore my sexual self or something, blah, blah. This doesn't mean I'm not a sexual person anymore; I just do it without the aid of the sex fairies. I've dated several nice women who have all dumped me because they found me to be "emotionally distant." I like to say that I have trust issues and leave it at that. My therapist is really pushing to explore those trust issues. Damn shrinks.

The only person from back home that I keep in contact with is Justin and, in all honesty, he doesn't really know where I am. I just email him from a Yahoo account. It's pretty anonymous, but if he knew where I was he and my mother would be up here so fast. I will tell them, maybe in another year. I'm still figuring out who this Carmen chick is. I told him the whole story one day not long after Ed and I moved up here. He emailed me back saying that he knew. Seems like Olivia broke down and told Mom and Justin the whole thing. The only thing that I hadn't known was that Olivia and Heidi had been dating. Olivia couldn't have Jen so she went for the next bad girl she could find I guess. Poor Olivia. She's doomed to have bad taste in women, or perhaps it's a genetic trait - I'm not doing so hot myself. Justin, bless the man, I want him to be my real dad so bad; he punched Kev out. Kevin came around while I was in the hospital, begging to see me, going on about how he needed to apologize. He confessed everything to Justin - there's something so dad-like about Justin. You know that nice house with the pool that Kevin got? It turns out that his dad didn't die. Anna gave him a bunch of money for insider info on all of us. The bastard sold us out; it hurts 'cause Kevin had been my buddy since grade school. So much for me being the genius in the family; I never saw any of it coming.

- - - - -

Stretching, I feel something bite my toe. "Ow! You little bastard." I stare blurrily down at the end of the bed and at a gray lump. Fumbling for the nightstand, I pick up my glasses and put them on. Clearly now, I can see the gray adolescent cat attacking my wiggling toes under the sheet. "Hey, Nappy. Did your dad kick you out?" Ed brought home the kitten a month ago; he said it followed him home. Then two weeks ago a woman followed him home and now Napoleon, or Nappy as I call him, gets locked out of his dad's room and has to bunk up with Aunt Carmen. Yep, Ed, the man of few words, has a woman in his room, and ten to one they're practicing how to make babies. I pick Nappy up and snuggle with him; he's about the only pussy I've had in my bed recently. Nappy yawns and curls up on my shoulder; I return the yawn and decide to go back to sleep.

Stumbling out of my room I smile at Sue and make a beeline for the coffeepot. Lifting the pot, I sniff it and shrug. It's hot; what do I care if it's a day old. Sitting down, I blink at Sue.

She laughs and messes up my bed-head hair. "You are so lucky you don't share a wall with Ed."

I snort. "Well, it's probably payback for when he had to listen to you and Rob."

She frowns and sticks out her tongue. "Still, it sucks. You want to trade me rooms?"

. I almost choke on my coffee. "Hell no."

- - - - -

I'm shelving new CD's at the music store. It's my day to pick the music, so it's a mix of Miles Davis, some World Beat sampler of music from Cuba, and Sleater-Kinney just to make sure everyone is still awake. It's raining - go figure - but rain with Miles Davis playing in the background is like being at a day spa; it's soothing. I turn the corner and starting shelving some S's when a faster Latin beat comes out of the speakers.

"Oh girl. You're speaking the language of my ancestors."

I laugh at Maria. I could say the same thing but I'm Argentinean not Cuban. It's close I'm sure; well, it's probably not close at all. Maria comes out from behind the counter, swaying her hips to the sassy music.

"Carmen my love, dance with me," she says in a breathy whisper.

It's all I can do not to break out in laughter. She grabs my hand, pulls me into her body, and we dance. I'm not the best dancer, but I'm a good follower if I have a good lead and Maria's the best.

It's the gay district so I'm not too worried about shocking people. The worst thing that will happen is that it will draw customers in on this rainy Wednesday. The song ends and the CD switches to the growling vocals of Corrin Tucker from Sleater-Kinney. Clapping hands greet our impromptu dance. I blush and Maria just bows.

"Girl, you know how to work those hips. If I wasn't with Devon I'd give you a test run." Maria slaps me on the ass; I just blush harder and go back to the S section.

Coming around the corner, I notice a woman staring. After looking around I realize she's staring at me; when I look back at her, she studiously starts examining the Soundtrack section. Slightly unnerved, I go back to work but catch her staring at me again out of the corner of my eye. After the whole 'Anna has a gun' thing, I'm a wee bit paranoid. I continue on pretending to work, but I have my eye on her the entire time but she doesn't look back my way. She does seem to be deep in thought about something and I seriously hope it's not about the ET soundtrack she's holding in her hands. I'm somewhat disappointed that she's not staring at me anymore - she is a cutie after all - but relieved at the same time; she's probably a psycho since I find her attractive.

Going back to work I start stocking the T section while at the same time putting stuff back into alphabetical order.

"Um¼ hi," I look up. It's the cute girl who may or may not have been checking me out earlier.

"That was great¼ the dance you and the other girl were doing, you looked hot." She blushes and I find her incredibly endearing. "I mean you two looked good together and¼ I'll just shut up now."

I almost laugh but I know if she is anything like me it took her a whole year's worth of courage to come up to me just now and say all that. So I go with a simple, "Thank you."

She blushes again and I want to kiss her right here and now but I don't. I figure it would be incredibly forward of me since I don't even know her name. "Is there something I can help you with?"

She opens her mouth then shuts it, seemingly to rethink what was going to come out of her mouth, then starts again. "So what was that music you two were dancing to?"

"The genre would be considered Latin, but more specifically it comes off a CD of various Cuban artists."

"Could you show me?"

I gave her an easy smile. "Sure."

"This is the one that's playing." I hand the CD to her. "These here are Cuban, but there's lots of other stuff that's good in here. If you're into dance music there are some good Latin dance mixes. Oh and, if you want to listen before you buy, let me know and I can set you up at a listening

station."

She smiles shyly at me and I can feel my brain turning into goo. This is so bad.

"Thanks, I'll let you know if you can help me in any other ways."

Okay, that was clearly flirting. "Um, okay, I'm just going to go back over to the T's and work^{1/4}okay."

From back over in the safety of the T section I keep sneaking peaks at her. She mumbles to herself as she checks out various CDs. There's something about her; I can't put my finger on it but she looks familiar. Her hair is a brownish-blond and falls down right past her shoulders; she's slightly taller than me; and she's wearing black slacks and a white button-down shirt under a gray wool jacket; the outfit makes me think of waitress in a nicer restaurant.

"So." The word in my ear causes me to jump. "I see you have the girl under surveillance. Are you just hot for her or is she going to steal the Latin Music section from us?"

"Maria, you nut. Don't scare me like that."

"Okay. How about I scare you like this?"

Maria proceeds to dig her fingers into my sides and I take off in a run, squealing in laughter as she tries to keep tickling me.

Maria has me cornered in the Christian Rock section when we hear a delicate cough. I look past Maria. *'Oh crap.'*

"Uh, yes, did you want to preview those CDs?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble; I can see you're busy and all." She gives a cute little grin to let us know she's just kidding with us.

Maria steps over to her, giving me some room to maneuver. "Let me see what you have^{1/4} excellent choices. My ancestors would be proud. I can see our little samba has inspired you to broaden your musical horizons."

"Yes, and the fact that you two dance so well didn't hurt."

"Why thank you. I'm Maria Garcia and this is Carmen Cortez. Welcome to our happy little shop, so happy it's gay."

I roll my eyes; that was subtle.

"And you are?"

"Oh, I'm April Harrison."

"April, it's lovely to meet you." Maria kisses April's hand and I just want to smack her.

April¼ April¼ why is that name familiar?

"Earth to Carmen. The lady would like some service and only the kind you can provide." Maria walks off with a wink.

"I, er, right this way." I set her up at a CD player and open the CD's for her. I give her a smile. "Just let me know if you need anything else." For a moment I think she's going to say something but she doesn't. I go back to the T section. Toto, Tears for Fears, Toni Braxton¼ wait a minute that belongs in B. My eyes search out April; I roll the name around in my brain trying to figure out why she seems familiar. Oooo, I almost have it, a dim smoky memory, something about a bar. Oh dear God, do not tell me I hit on her already when I was drunk at the bar! Maybe I should just ask her.

I'm ringing up April's purchases. Devon has shown up to bring Maria lunch and they're in the back probably having smoochies.

"So, do I know you from somewhere? Because it's bugging me." Well, that was smooth, Car.

"We-we've met before."

"Yeah, I just can't place where."

She grabs her bag of CD's. "Maybe this will help. If you play YMCA for me and my friends, I'll give you a kiss."

The straight girl or not-so-straight girl who gave me a kiss and asked me to coffee. What are the chances that I would run into her again, and here of all places? Oh my god, it's Anna all over again. I wonder who in my family ruined her life. While my brain is racking itself for answers, I start to have a panic attack and faint.

"Carmen¼ Carmen¼ please wake up."

I'm vaguely aware that someone is patting me on the cheek.

"Here, I see this on the movies all the time."

Lots of water slaps me in the face. Slowly I open my eyes and stare into Maria's brown ones.

"Oh good, you're up. The boss man says go home, take the next two days off, and don't sue him."

"Okay." This is a lot of info for me to digest at once and my brain is still scrambled. "What happened?"

"Well, that girl, April, was hitting on you and you fainted. Way to go, Captain Smooth."

"Well pooh. That just sucks." It does. I slowly get up, making sure everything still works.

"For some reason she's still hanging out. Maybe you should go talk to her."

"Right." Maria nudges me in April's direction.

I walk over to her on shaky legs, "No harm done."

Her hazel eyes catch mine. I can tell she's been crying although she tries to hide it. I sit down next to her. "I'm really sorry I scared you like that. If-if you like, would you like to go grab some coffee and maybe talk?" When I say coffee, I mean coffee. No sex until I'm sure they're not psycho.

"Yes, I'd like that. You really scared me, Carmen. If your friend Maria hadn't been here I don't know what I would have done. This isn't how I thought our first meeting would go." She gets up and holds out her hand to help me up.

"Really? And how did you think our first meeting would go?" I hold the door open for her.

"Well, I'd babble and stumble over my words and make an ass out of myself. You would laugh your charming laugh and make everything okay. Then I'd ask you out for dinner and we'd live happily ever after from there."

I laugh and she blushes. "Okay, so it was the lesbian romance novel version that was playing in my head."

- - - - -

One coffee date turned into several with dinner and lunches thrown in, along with a few romantic walks in the rain. She was a student working on her Masters in Communication with an emphasis in Journalism while working two jobs part time -one at a local paper and also as a waitress at the Thai restaurant on Capital Hill. I don't know how she does it, two jobs, her classes, and us. Somehow she did, but something had to give and it was me. Remember my trust issues and emotional distance? Well, after about two months of that she had enough and everything blew up.

"Why can't you trust me?"

"I do trust you."

"No, you don't."

"What the hell do you want from me?"

"I want you to let me in. God, if I hadn't been to your hometown, I would have no clue where you were from or what happened with your family."

"What do you mean my family?"

"Your sister and your friend Ashley being sent to jail."

"That is none of your business. You had no right."

"It's public knowledge. My friend Heather is from there; when she found out we were dating, and I use the term dating loosely, she told me about it! Why did I have to find out from her and not you?"

I felt violated even though a part of me knew April had done no real wrong. "You bitch!"

"Get out!"

"What? You're throwing me out?"

"It's my house and I'm not just throwing you out. I never want to see you again, Carmen."

"Not like its it's some big loss. Fucking uptight prude." April and I had yet to have sex. Now two months isn't really that long to be in a relationship and not do the deed, but it was a first for me. It should have clued me in on how special April was. She knew I had issues and was willing to wait on the physical part but, no, I was too wrapped up in myself to realize what an ass I was being.

"Get out!" I stepped out and she slammed the door in my face behind me. I wish right then that I had gotten a clue but I didn't.

- - - - -

"Carmen, you seem particularly quiet today. You want to talk about it?"

Blinking in surprise I looked up at my therapist. She's an older woman with graying hair and round glasses that make her look vaguely owlsh. "No, not really."

"Are you sure? I can tell that, whatever it is, it's really upsetting you."

"No, I'm fine."

We sat in silence. I can't believe I'm paying for this. "I don't get women, you know." A humorless chuckle escapes. "Which is funny considering I am one."

"What happened?"

"April threw me out because I wouldn't share my feelings." Pausing, I fumble for words. "Why do women want to know what you're thinking and feeling every fucking second? Most of the time I'm not thinking of anything."

"It must have hurt, when she told you to leave."

"Nah, it's no big deal." I'm such a liar; it hurts so much there are tears in my eyes.

"Why do you think she threw you out?"

I almost said because she's a frigid bitch, but then I stopped and actually used my brain which was something I hadn't been doing too much of lately. And people thought I was going to be the next Einstein.

- - - - -

My hour was up and instead of feeling better I felt worse. To top it all off, my therapist had gotten me to talk about some of my trust issues. Sneaky psycho-babbler.

Walking up April's street I ran over my speech in my head. It had been four days since she threw me out and we had not spoken at all. It had struck me very clearly in my session.

"Does April like you? Does she enjoy spending time with you?"

"Well, until the night she kicked me out, of course she did."

"How did you know?"

"She told me. Gave me little love notes and 1/4" I trailed off, thinking.

"She opened up and told you what she was feeling and thinking. She's not a mind reader; she can't know what your wants or needs are unless you express your feelings and thoughts."

"Hey! I pay you good money; you should be on my side."

"I am. I'm trying to help you. God help me, you make it so difficult." She gave me a smile to let me know she was teasing.

How April put up with me for nearly two months I'll never know, but hopefully I could still make everything okay. I really liked April and four days apart was like having my Miles Davis CD stolen - it sucked.

I knocked on her door, composing my thoughts; hearing someone coming to the door I fixed my face into an 'I'm really sorry, please forgive me' me face. Her roommate opened the door; seeing me, slammed the door shut in my face. *'Car, that is decidedly a very bad thing.'* I knocked again as a drop of rain splashed on the flowers I was holding in my hand. *'Figures.'* Hearing footsteps again, I re-fixed my face. This time April opened the door. She looks like shit and I felt instantly feel horrible. Her eyes are bloodshot and her face is pale. I open my mouth to say my apologies and the door is slammed shut again. *'Well, this is a flashback to four days ago.'* I knock again. Nothing. Knocking on the door, I shout, "I know you're in there. I just saw you. I'm not leaving until we talk." More rain drops splatter on my head as I wait.

The door opens again; this time April looks pissed. "Oh, now you want to talk. What about what I want, huh?"

"What do you want?" I ask meekly.

"Well, four days ago I wanted to talk, but it wasn't convenient for you."

"April, please, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Can we please talk?"

"Sorry, Carmen, but this prude has a date."

"What? You can't. Jesus, it's only been four days. How could you?"

"How could I? I think that's none of your business." The door slams yet again.

'God damn it!' "April! April, I'm not leaving until you let me in and we talk!" Date my ass, she was not dressed up for a date. The rain is coming down in a light drizzle and I stand in it as seconds turn into minutes and minutes turn into a half hour. The door opens again. God, I hope I've proven my sincerity. April stands there in a khaki slacks and her soft blue sweater^{1/4} and^{1/4} and she looks like she's going out. Shit! I love that sweater; she can't wear that sweater for anybody else but me.

She shuts the door and steps past me. "I'm going out, Carmen. Please go home and leave me alone."

"April, I'm staying here until we talk."

"Whatever," she mumbles at me as she gets in her car and speeds off.

I watch her, stunned. I figured she was bluffing, some sort of test to prove my depth of sorry-ness for acting like an ass.

It's been an hour and I'm sitting in the rain on her front steps. The flowers are limp in my hand and I'm wondering if I've crossed into that scary gray area of being a stalker. Who in their right mind sits in the rain waiting for the girl that they've wronged to come back from a date with another woman? More time passes and I can't feel my butt anymore; it's gone numb. Ten minutes later I'm doing jumping jacks trying to stay warm. Another 12 minutes and I'm soaked to the bone. Fifteen minutes after that I decide to give up; my throat hurts and I can't stop sneezing. Then a cop car pulls up. Well, I think that answers that for me; I have officially become a stalker. God, I'm going to have to pay my therapist for extra visits now.

As a tall person exits the car, I just hold my hands up. "Look, I was just leaving. I might be a little slow but I can take a hint."

He holds out a hand. "Identification."

Sneezing, I pull out my wallet and hand him my drivers license.

"Don't move; I'll be right back." He goes back to his nice dry car and to radio in.

I just hang my head and toe the wet earth. Hearing another car pull up and the engine cut off, I can't help but grimace. *'Oh, just shoot me.'* I look up and see April get out of her car. Of course, she's gone all this time and now shows up when I'm about to get arrested. Squinting, I try to see if there is anybody else in her car; I can't tell.

"What is going on? Carmen?"

"I was just leaving, I swear," I croak out. I have snot running out my nose; I can feel it.

"Ma'am, do you know this person?"

"Yes, she's my ex."

"Okay, I think I get the picture. Ms. Webster, if you would get in the car."

"What? What picture? There's no picture to get!"

"We got a call about a person loitering on your lawn. I drove by then again 20 minutes later. Ms. Webster was still here."

Should I put my arms up or behind my head?

"Really, Officer, it's fine. Carmen wouldn't hurt me."

Is she defending me? I try to smile but sneeze instead.

"Are you sure?" he asks gravely.

"Yes."

"Okay then. Here's your ID back."

"Thanks," I reply, sniffing all the while.

He drives off, and I can't look at her.

"Why are you still here?"

"Look, I was just going. I'm sorry if I ruined your date; I'll just get out of your way." I start to walk off then I stop. "Look, I wasn't trying to be some scary stalker type, honest. If you want me to leave you alone I will. I just wanted to talk because I think I get what was upsetting you, and¹/₄" I feel kind of fuzzy, then warm, and then fuzzy and warm at the same time. "¹/₄and¹/₄ um, I'm sorry for not telling you how much I've enjoyed these last couple of months and how special you make me feel because I know how busy and hectic your life is and yet you always have time for me¹/₄ us." Everything is becoming kind of blurry and I'm so warm. It's probably a bad sign that I want to take my clothes off so I won't be so warm.

"I should go." I make it to the street. Looking both ways I wonder where my house is from here. I should know this.

"Carmen?"

"What? Oh hi." It's April; we like April. *'What's this we crap? There should only be one me.'* I give her a goofy grin.

"Carmen?"

"Hi."

She smiles back worriedly. "Have you been standing out here the whole time?"

"Yep."

"In the rain."

"Yep. Only thing missing was Miles Davis, and, well, you."

"Come inside. You don't look so good."

"I don't really feel that good. I'm so warm."

She places a hand on my forehead; it's so nice and cool. I give a cry of protest when she takes it away.

"I should go home. You have plans that don't include me."

"It's okay. Really. I'll put on Miles Davis and make cocoa and we can talk."

I don't remember any cocoa and just vaguely remember hearing Miles' rendition of Summertime before I pass out in April's bed.

Waking up the next morning, I still don't feel so good, but I'm not as warm. Looking around I don't spot April. I get up and go into the kitchen to pour some juice. Sighing, I figure I should call Sue and Ed.

"Hello," Molly, Ed's girl, answers the phone.

"Hey Sexy," I croak out.

She giggles. "Well, maybe I should leave Ed for you. He never calls me sexy." I can hear Ed in the background asking if it's me on the phone. "Yeah, it's her."

There's some rustling before Ed comes on the line, and then it's silent.

"Ed?"

"Yeah."

More silence. Grrrr. "Ed, the Vulcan mind meld doesn't work over the phone. You need to talk to me."

More rustling, and Molly is back. "He says, and I quote, 'What's this sexy crap? You trying to steal my girl, Webster?'"

I giggle but it turns into a cough. "You going all caveman on me, Eddie?"

He grunts into the phone in response. Then Molly asks, "You don't sound so good. Did¹/₄did you and April not work things out?"

"I¹/₄ um¹/₄" I sneeze. "Well, I passed out on her before we could actually talk." There's some background single syllable grunting, then Molly's voice is back. "Ed says, 'Details, Car. I can't help if I don't know.'"

Sighing - this is so weird - I start talking. "So what do you think?"

"I think you're right. You turned into some psycho stalker type."

"Ed! Er, Molly, whoever¼"

There is some background rustling. "Okay, Car, Ed has a serious question for you. 'If and when you two talk and this time she still wants you to leave her alone, will you pull that kind of stunt again?'"

"Jesus, no. What do you think I am?"

"Just checking. Carmen, you were really stupid and lucky that you didn't get hauled in."

"But¼"

"Ed and I do understand why you did it, and Ed's really happy you just didn't give up on your relationship like you always do, but no more standing in the rain getting sick and giving people the wrong impression."

I giggle. "Ed, I liked you better when you talked less."

Ed finally says, "I know."

I hang up with a sneeze and blow my nose. I walk out of the kitchen with my juice to find out where April spent the night. She looks up at me from the couch; she's so cute with her bed head.

"Hi."

She smiles at me for a moment then it disappears. "Who were you talking too?"

"Oh, um, my roommate Ed."

"You call Ed sexy?"

"Well, no, that was his girlfriend." Realizing that I'm making things worse, I clarify, "It's kind of a joke."

"Carmen, how would I know? I've never met your roommate¼"

"Uh, it's plural. Roommates: Ed and Sue."

She glares at me. "I've never met your Ed and Sue. I've never been over to your house or apartment, or wherever you live."

"Really?" Stunned, I sit down. Surely she had been over; wracking my brain I discover that she hadn't.

"April, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize." God I'm such an ass; there is no way she's going to take me back. "Thank you for taking care of me last night. I'm sorry I put a damper on your evening." I

get up.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my clothes. I'm sure you want me gone."

"I thought you wanted to talk."

I open my mouth in surprise then shut it. "I-I-I do. Do you?"

"Of course I do."

"I thought you would want me to leave."

"I still might."

"Oh," I say dejectedly.

"But it's too soon to know, so why don't we try talking."

"Kay."

I fidget nervously and she just looks at me patiently.

"I'm really sorry for the way I acted and what I said."

"Thank you."

I wait for her to say anything else but she remains silent.

"I, well, it started the night Anna Russell walked into a dirty small gay bar called the Closet."

She nodded, familiar with the bar; it's where we first met after all.

"What I didn't know was that Anna and I had a history^{1/4}"

It started with a woman, as do most things in life I guess - like birth. And it ended with the complete restructuring of my life and who I was. Anxiously I'm waiting for April to say anything, even a nonsensical verb like, 'huh'.

Her hazel eyes bore into mine.

"Why did you tell me all of that?"

That wasn't what I was expecting. "You wanted me to let you in^{1/4}"

"Why me? You just dump all that on me; that's unfair."

"What?" How did I screw up now?

"You've been seeing a therapist for how long and me you just dump this on?"

"I thought you wanted¼ I mean¼" I don't feel good. April is looking like she's going kick me out for good, so I just start crying. Why do people have to be so confusing?

"Hey, I'm sorry. Its just that's a lot to take in. I was just expecting some great former love in your past that had broken your heart, not some soap opera of murder and betrayal."

"Do you want me to leave?"

She hugs me. "No, oh no, Carmen. However, I think you and I need to take things really slow. For both of us."

I sniffle and hope I haven't gotten snot on her. "Does that mean we're getting back together?"

"It means¼it means, we're dating. We'll see from there."

"Okay." Poo, I was hoping for some big exclaimer of love. Isn't that how it works on TV? Just another way TV has lied to me, that and spinach does not make you instantly strong like Popeye.

Later in the evening I'm getting ready to go. Somehow April got me to sleep some more and we did some light talking, nothing as heavy as this morning.

"April, thanks again for taking care of me and, well, everything. I-I-I'm sorry if I ruined your evening last night." I fidget, not sure if I should kiss her, not really sure where we stand in our relationship.

She kisses me on the cheek, which isn't fabulous but still better than no kiss. "Carmen, um, there's something you should know."

Oh God, there's more. When will this day end?

"There was no date. I couldn't deal with you being here; I was still so mad at you. Since you wouldn't leave I left. I went and drove around for awhile until I was sure you'd be gone." She giggles. "You were still here doing jumping jacks on my front porch. So I waited down the block for you to leave, but when the policeman showed up I couldn't let them haul you away."

I groan. April had sat there and watched me make an ass of myself.

"You were so cute."

"Really?"

"I'm sorry you got sick, but I wasn't ready to deal with you yet, even if you were sorry and wanted to make amends."

"It's okay." She still thinks I'm cute.

She starts to kiss me, this time on the lips. "April, I'm sick."

"I don't care."

Her lips were soft and warm, not gentle at all. She controlled the kiss totally. I was weak-kneed and standing on the steps when she shut the door softly in my face.

"Oh, that's so not right."

I think I hear her laughing at me.

~~~~~

So this is it, the conclusion. How sad. I think I started this story a year ago and now we come to the end of Carmen's story. Well, perhaps not the end. Carmen probably has one more story in her.

## Part 8

I sat in Denny's, way over-caffeinated. My hands jittered and I was stacking things, trying to make a pyramid with empty coffee creamers; somehow the salt and pepper shakers got involved as well. Ed and I were waiting for Molly to get off work at the tattoo parlor next door. Molly wasn't a tattoo artist; she did piercings although she was a fantastic artist in her own right. She sometimes designed stuff for people but she didn't handle the inker's needle. Molly had just recently convinced me to get a tattoo. I had been eating breakfast when she plopped down and started rattling on about how I needed to "own" my scar. At the time I couldn't follow a word she was saying because she was naked. Molly, God bless her, isn't shy at all. I think it's 'cause her parents were studying in France when she was born and she grew up there before returning to the States. To her, a naked body doesn't represent sexuality; it represents flesh keeping your internal organs inside. The idea of sexuality to her lies in intent and action. However, it took me awhile to stop drooling 'cause she's hot, and while I may be happy with April I'm not dead. Although if Molly doesn't start wearing clothes I may go blind.

*"Uh huh, own the scar." I nodded.*

*Molly laughed. "Should I go put some clothes on? I forget how distracting I can be."*

*"Uh huh, distracting<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> what? Oh no, um, I'm cool with the whole, no clothes, naked<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> yes,*



*please."*

*Laughing, Molly disappeared into Ed's room and came back wearing a T-shirt and sweats.*

*Sitting back down, she set her sketchpad in front of me. "So," she started, "I've been thinking about your tattoo and what would work for you."*

*"Um, Molly, I love your work and all but I'm not getting a tattoo."*

*"Yes, you are - look." She tapped the pad, drawing my eyes down to it. It was a stanza of musical notes. They were stylized and flowed across the paper. I began to hum the notes, wondering why it seemed familiar.*

*"It should go around your wrist where you had the accident. It will highlight it and hide it all at the same time, and hopefully in the end your moment of pain will be transformed into beauty."*

*I just gaped at her, my mouth hanging open. Where Ed hardly spoke, Molly spoke with rippling elegance. Their dichotomies only ended up complementing them as a couple. I hope that Ed holds on to her.*

*"That's beautiful."*

*She beamed. "And it will look beautiful around your wrist."*

*The only thing I could say was, "Yes."*

"Hello all," Molly said in greeting before jumping into Ed's lap to lay a big smooch on him. Ed grunted and turned slightly red. She snuggled in his lap, looking content and very much like she had no intention of using a chair of her own. She eyed my sculpture in progress. "Okay, no more coffee for Carmen. Ed, you know she's not supposed to have more than two cups unless you're going to take her for a run around the block. If I had taken any longer, I bet she would have started stacking the chairs into pyramids."

I looked over at the table next to us, eyeing the unused chairs. Not a bad idea.

Ed, reading where my thoughts were going, grunted, "Don't."

"Party pooper," I grumbled back.

Molly laughed at us. "Car, I talked to Glen and you're on for Wednesday to start work on the tattoo."

"Great." I tried to look happy and I was. However, I was terrified of the needle and the possible pain involved.

"And don't worry. I'll be right there with you for support."

"Good." That made me feel a lot better.

Ed and Molly went back to snuggling and looking longingly into each other's eyes. I thought about April and wondered what she was doing at this very moment; she was probably taking somebody's order. Finally, after the waiter grumbled at Ed and Molly to get a room, we vacated the premises.

"So have you been playing stalker anymore over at April's?"

I glared at Molly. "No."

She laughed, her blonde hair sweeping back and forth across her face. She was going for platinum blonde this month and the streetlight glinted off the red ruby stud in her nose.

"Oh, don't pout. I actually think it was sweet, but only because I know you. You know?"

"Huh?"

"Well, if one of my girlfriends were to tell me this story on how her ex just showed up at her house and refused to leave until they talked<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> well, my first thought would be that they were psycho. But I know you, so when I hear your story I think it's sweet. April is so lucky to have someone like you interested in her."

"Oh. Okay." I think I followed her.

"So<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> do we ever get to meet this woman who has captured our little Carmen's fair heart?"

I snorted at her literary license. "Maybe. She's coming over tomorrow for dinner and movies."

"Sweet and simple."

Ed grunted. *Translation - Oh yeah, that's Carmen to a 'T'.*

"Oh yeah, buster? What do you and Molly do in our house except try to make babies? Have you done anything remotely romantic?"

Molly and I stopped to eye him. Ed seemed to shrink and he sputtered. Then he croaked out, "Flowers. I sent her flowers."

Molly patted his head. "Once. Carmen has a point though. You're slacking off in the romance department, bucko."

Ed glared and punched me in the shoulder.

"Sorry." I rubbed my shoulder.

"In fact, I think I'll be sleeping at my own place which I'm sure will shock the heck out of my roommates. You're flying solo, bucko, until I get some romance." She kissed a stunned Ed on the lips and a smirking me on the cheek. "Tootles." She waved at us then jogged across the street to catch the cab standing in the gas station parking lot.

Ed turned to me, his mouth hanging open. "You¼ she¼ you¼ gahhhhh!"

Wisely, I started to run with Ed following close behind.

- - - - -

I stared at the apartment. I had spent my day off cleaning. The dishes were put away, the floor mopped, the carpets vacuumed, the couch beaten until the dust bunnies fled in terror, and Nappy was brushed so he wouldn't track hair everywhere. I wondered if I should light candles. Set some sort of romantic atmosphere as it were. I went with two vanilla-scented ones just in case the house smelled too much like cat. I was afraid if I lit too many I would end up setting the place on fire.

For dinner I was just going to order pizza, but Sue just looked at me until I said, "No pizza?"

She nodded and patted my head. "Carmen, you are trying to impress the girl. You want her to realize what a good catch you are and forget all about your stalker tendencies."

I sighed. I was never going to live down that couple of hours in the rain. "So I'm cooking then?"

Sue nodded.

With another heavy sigh I turned to the fridge to see what we had.

"Oh, and wine would be good."

"Wine? Great, now I have to go shopping."

"Of course. Come on; I'll help." Sue took my hand and dragged me out of the house.

So now, with the house clean, I found myself cooking over the stove. It's not that I can't cook; it's just not a thing I enjoy. Why cook when I have a freezer of instant meals at my disposal? I was stir-frying the chicken and veggies, the rice was bubbling away, and I was eying the wine. Sadly April was probably going to have to open it. I tried to get a wine bottle with a twist-off cap, but Sue just stared until I took it out of the cart and put it back on the shelf. She picked out a lovely bottle of something reddish. She even took great delight in pointing out that it was from

Argentina and maybe some of my relatives had a hand in making it. I rolled my eyes and put it in the cart; the cork looked tightly settled in the bottle. Every time I try to open a bottle of wine, I end up breaking the cork in half and digging the rest out with a knife.

I had the house to myself, well, for a while anyway. Both Sue and Ed promised to give me until nine or so, then it was fair game. Which was fine because April wanted to meet them. I turned the burner down to low and went over a mental list. Everybody gone - check. House clean - check. Cat busy attacking a catnip mouse in Ed's room - check. Food - cooking. Music - hmm. While still trendy in a post-modern feminist way, the screaming vocals of Janice Joplin probably wouldn't set the mood for a romantic dinner and movie night. I then realized I was not dressed. Well, I wasn't naked, but I wasn't wearing proper date clothes unless I wanted to impress April by mooning her with the large tear in the ass of my jeans. Checking the food one more time, I ran to my bedroom. Remembering Sue's sage advice - "wear a solid color shirt" - I skipped over most of my shirts and went for the ones I normally wore for important functions like <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> family dinner night. I'm not sure why it popped into my head but it did. Suddenly I was missing my family, even my stupid sister who tried to get me to think I was a murderer. Clutching the shirt I had worn to the last important family function before I had left, I started sobbing into the soft cotton. I'd really thought I was done crying about the whole thing, but the hurt is was still raw, still hiding right under the surface of things.

I let it out just like my therapist told me and then wiped my face with the shirt. Great, now I'm going to have puffy eyes, just what every girl needs right before they try to woo someone with romance. I'm going to look miserable the whole night. With a defeated sigh, I pull out my jazz outfit. Ed has something similar for the jazz band we played in. I slid the black shirt over my head and tucked it into khaki slacks, then slid a shiny disco-ball-like belt through the belt loops. Jeez, I wasn't even leaving the house; what a waste. The things we do for the perception of love.

Rushing back to the kitchen in my sock-covered feet, I slid across the linoleum. Thankfully the food was fine; it hadn't burned to a crisp during my little crying session. I stirred the stir-fry around and poked at the rice. Sensing that all was well, I picked up the remote for the stereo and punched up the radio. Ewww, light jazz. I'll just put her in a coma; that will make an impression. Rock, metal, NPR, Christian - I sigh. Where is the station for 'I have a date' music? I really could use one in my time of need. I give up and flip the stereo over to CD. Sue is a girl; she'll have soft romantic music. After scrounging through Sue's CD collection, there is soft classical music wafting through the house. I think everything is a go.

I'm dishing out the food and setting it on the table when I hear a knock on the door. Quickly I do one of those annoying last minute checks: breath, zipper, teeth, and we're good. I rush to the door. I just stand there for a moment, goofy grin in place, staring at her. She is such the nicest, healthiest, sweetest, gorgeous woman <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I come out of my thoughts and blush, realizing that I'm just letting her stand there.

"Hi, uh, come in. Right on time." She smiles, walking past me. *Stupid, stupid. Way to start the evening, just stare at her like a moron.* I shut the door.

"So this is your place."

"Yep, this would be the place in which I cohabitate with Sue and Ed. Oh, and Nappy, Ed's cat. Well, and Molly, and then there's that guy Sue is dating¼"

April sets the DVD's down on the couch and comes over, placing a finger on my lips to make me to be silent.

"Are you nervous?" she asks.

"Um, yeah. I want you to like being with me."

She kisses me on the cheek. It's innocent but very heartwarming.

"It's cute. I know I asked you to open up and talk more, but I didn't really imagine it would turn into super speed babble."

I blush. "Um, dinner is ready if you would like to, oh, your coat¼ I should probably take that."

She grins and takes off her coat, handing it to me. Stunned, I reach out a hand to take her it but I totally miss¼ because I'm too busy looking at the skin being exposed. She's wearing a tank top with spaghetti straps so there's lots of shoulder being exposed to the elements. It's black, and it shimmers softly as the light strikes it. Silk maybe? Actually, who honestly cares? She looks good in it and that's what matters.

"Carmen?"

"Huh?"

"My coat."

"Yeah. What? Oh, sorry." Still not recovered from the previous blush, my face turns even redder. I scoop her coat off the floor. "I was just, um, well¼" I take a breath. "I'm nervous, and you look really good in that, and you so had my attention on your shoulders just now."

She grins impishly. "So you're a shoulder woman."

Not really getting her teasing, I reply as I'm hanging up her coat. "I'm more of a lips woman. I like nice kissable lips."

"Really? Upper or lower?"

"Upper or lower what?" I ask, distracted as I try to find space on the coat hooks. Some women collect shoes; Sue collects coats.

"Lips."

"Huh? Oh, OH." I stumble into a hook, nearly poking my eye out. Rubbing my forehead, I glare at her. She laughs and takes my arm. She kisses me on the cheek again and I forgive her for being a brat to me.

"So give me the tour."

-----

Dinner was a smashing success if I do say so myself. It was so good that I now have lap privileges. Which means I get to lay my head in her lap as we watch the movies she brought over. If I were Nappy I'd be purring. She keeps playing with my hair and it's making me all drowsy. The first movie was some lesbian movie called 'Go Fish' which April raved on and on about. I thought it sucked. It was boring and there were no fight sequences - dull, very dull. April smacked me when I told her so and I had a mini-freak-out, thinking I had screwed up again. Thankfully, I was just being over-sensitive. She tousled my hair and told me so.

"I guess everyone's entitled to their opinion even if it's wrong."

She smiled and patted her thigh for me to put my head back down, and I knew it was all okay. Now we're watching 'But I'm a Cheerleader', another lesbian movie. This is more my speed. It's funny, and a bit campy; it hits most of the stereotypes and twists them for amusement. It even has Rue Paul playing a straight man.

Hello - sex scene. Well, that's just¼ is it warm in here? Bad thoughts. Bad¼ maybe I should move my head out of her lap now. I start to sit up.

"Where are you going?"

"I, um, thought¼" Thankfully the door opens, saving me from what I feel to be an awkward situation.

"Where is she?" Sue asks, throwing her keys on the counter. "Carmen?" she asks when I don't answer right away.

I roll my eyes and finish sitting up. "It's not too late. I can still sneak you out of here," I tell April, sort of joking.

"Hush. I can't wait to meet your roommates." She leans over to grab the remote and pauses the movie.

I get a great cleavage shot.

"We're watching movies."

"Okay. You're dressed, aren't you?" Sue asks.

"Yes, unlike you and what's-his-name last week."

April smacks me in the arm.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"You're letting me sit on a couch that you know someone had sex on."

I blink. "Well, I guess. But I'm not sure there's much in the way of furniture that hasn't been used as a prop of sorts for sex in this house."

April blushes.

"It's true," Sue replies as she walks in on the last part of our conversation. "Hi, I'm Sue."

They shake hands and Sue obviously checks April out.

"Stop looking at my girl like that." Realizing what I'd said, I blush. "I mean¼ I don't know what I mean, but I don't like the way you're looking at April."

April pats my arm. "It's okay. I'm a big girl; I can take it."

"Nothing personal, but the last girl Car fell for turned out to be psycho. You're not psycho, are you?"

I just hid my face in my hands.

"I have my days. But overall I would say - no, I'm not psycho."

Sue smiles. "Good. Now move over."

Sue practically jumps on me and I move over to share the couch with April and Sue.

"What are we watching?"

Giving up on any privacy, I tell her, and then I tell her there are some leftovers in the fridge.

"I'll get them later, but thanks."

I glare at Sue and try to tell her with my eyes to go away but she doesn't listen.

April pats my arm and restarts the movie.

We're about halfway through the movie when the door slams open and Molly comes tearing in, making a noise that sounds somewhere between a giggle and a shriek. Ed is following close at her heels, laughing. Once he spots us staring he takes on his usual posture of cool non-caring, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Hey," he grunts.

I have to laugh. That little display was so out of character for him.

"Eddie, I thought we were playing<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" Molly trails off when she spots us. "Oh hello." She gives a little wave and then stands next to Ed. "I forgot tonight was Carmen's big date night. You must be April."

I give a cough when Sue elbows me. "Uh<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>yes. April, this is Molly and Ed."

April gives a little wave. "It's so nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"Really?" Sue and Molly ask at the same time.

"Well, just recently I've heard a whole lot about all of you."

"Carmen, have you been telling tales?" Molly shakes her finger at me.

"What? Jeez, make up your mind, people. First you want me to talk more; now you're all busting my chops." I pout. I'm so not ever bringing a date over again. I'm like the little sister with this huge line of older siblings scoping out my date.

"Awww, Car. Don't pout." Molly plunks herself down in my lap and pinches my lip. "Oh cool. I love this movie."

I sigh and we restart it again for the third time.

"Car," Ed grunts.

"Um, Molly, Ed thinks I'm trying to steal you again. Could you please go sit with him." She gives me a kiss on the cheek and gets off my lap.

April leans over. "Should I be jealous?"

"Huh? Oh no. Molly and I, we're not<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> she's all about Ed and I'm all about you."

She smiles and kisses my other cheek. "Good to know."



-----

With the movie over, April and I have the couch to ourselves again. Molly and Ed are "sleeping" and Sue went out with what's-his-name - Burt, Ben, Bubba, I can never remember. I'm back to lying in April's lap, drowsily watching some old movie starring Cary Grant. I'm happy, very content, and not sure I want the evening to come to an end.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about how much I like vanilla ice cream."

She laughs. "No, seriously."

I sigh. "I was thinking about how I wish I had the courage to ask you to stay the night, but I'm not sure if that would be too forward."

She doesn't say anything and, worried, I roll over onto my back so I can better see her face. She's worrying biting her bottom lip in thought. She looks down, startled as her eyes fall into mine. Her lips twitch and then she breaks out into a smile. Her hand comes up and a finger brushes the hair out of my face. "It's tempting." The same finger that moved my hair out of my face now smooths the muscles around my face that had shifted to create a frown. "But I don't really think that would be a good move."

"Hey, I'm not implying sex here."

"Really?"

"Okay, maybe it could have been inferred," I mumble. "But I'm okay with just snuggling."

She just stares, eyeing me skeptically.

I try to look innocent. "Okay, I admit I'm horny. However, I'm sure I could do snuggling."

She leans over to kiss my forehead. "I'm tempted, but not yet. Okay?"

I give a pitiful sigh. "Fine, but I'm having a nice time. I don't want you to leave."

"Fine." She turns off the TV. "Tell me something about you. What did you want most of all when you were growing up?"

I think for a moment. "I wanted Justin to be my real dad."

"What happened to your real dad?"

"That's a good question. Mom says he ran off with his secretary."

"Justin is your step-dad?"

"Yeah. He's the best." I smile, remembering all the great times I've had with him.

"That's a pretty smile."

"Shut up." I blush.

"No, it is. What were you thinking about?"

"Stuff."

"Stuff, huh?"

"Yep, stuff."

"I'll show you stuff."

I start to squeal as fingers dig into my sides. Wiggling around like a salmon on crack, I wiggle away from the questing fingers and flop onto the floor off the couch. "Ufff," I groan out as I hit the floor.

"You okay?" Laughing hazel eyes look down from the couch.

"Evil woman, you must pay." I grab her legs and pull her off the couch.

"Carmen, don't." But it's too late. I have her on the floor. "You're so mean."

"Blah, blah, Ms. Tickle-fingers."

"Them's fightin' words," April growls, and lunges at me, her fingers looking for tickle spots.

Okay, tickle fights are a form of foreplay. I hate to break it to you. If you and your significant other are rolling around on the ground trying to tickle each other, it's foreplay, so it's no wonder that a few minutes later my tongue was trying to tickle the inside of April's mouth. Goodness only knows where my shirt went. My skin buzzed from where her hands touched, grabbed, and stroked.

My body is made up of fire and heat. I am a creature of Vulcan's forge. Lips kissing my shoulder, I hiss in pain as the kiss turns into a bite and I return one in kind to the bit of flesh I'm sucking on. I hear April whimper, and I catalog that place for future reference.

I whimper as hands push me away.

"Car, we have to stop."

I flop back onto the floor, just staring at her. "What? I mean, okay. Yeah, okay, okay."

She touches my face with a hand.

"No touching yet, please. Give me a moment."

She smiles and nods.

It's okay. I would prefer not stopping but I know she wants this but - just not right now. I am a cool, understanding, and patient person. "I'm okay now. Um, do you know where my shirt is?"

With a blush of her own she hands me my shirt.

"Thanks."

"I should go?"

"No, it's cool. You sure?"

She nods. "Yes, I'm sure. If I stay any longer, I'll want to stay the whole night, and I don't really think we're ready for that."

"Yeah." I'm not sure I get what she's getting at, but she believes it to be true so I respect that.

I get dressed and we pick up, sharing a kiss here and there. I walk her to the door.

"So we're good, right?" I ask, really wanting to know.

"Yes, we're good."

"So are you my girlfriend again?"

She bursts out laughing.

What? I think it's a legitimate question.

"You're so cute. Don't ever change." She kisses me softly then walks out the door.

I do notice that she didn't answer my question, but I think it's one of those trick responses and I'm already supposed to know the answer.

I'm cleaning up the living room when I hear a soft cough from behind me. I finish putting the last pillow back on the couch and then turn. Ed is looking at me with a soft smile.

"Is that a hickey on your chest?"

He crosses his arms over his bare chest. "No."

"Wow, Molly's a big old leach, isn't she?"

"Shush, you." He waves a finger at me.

We stand there smiling like a couple of idiots for a while. Realizing what we are doing, we cough nervously.

"Are we done having a moment?" I ask.

He shakes his head and moves over to the couch to sit down. He pats the seat cushion next to him and I slowly sit.

"I like her."

I blush. "Thanks. I like her too."

He shakes his head. "No, Car, I really like her. She gets to you. She makes you almost act like the Car I knew, before you changed."

"Ed, what are you talking about? I haven't changed; I'm still me."

He sighs. His jaw muscle is working; it's almost like he's tasting the words before he uses them. "After Anna<sup>1/4</sup>" He pauses again. "You did change and all we could do was wait for you to come back to us. You became cold and detached. You liked the women you went out with but you only dated them on the surface; it was about short-term wants and needs. When they wanted more, you grew distant until they gave up. April, she<sup>1/4</sup> she pushes you to look beyond the surface of things. It's like she knows there's more to you than you're willing to give, and she challenges you to show her the real Carmen, not this shadow puppet you go out and pretend to be every day."

Ed with the big soliloquy and the<sup>1/4</sup> did he just call me a shadow puppet?

"I have not been cold and distant. Have I?"

"Yeah, you have."

I feel tears gather in my eyes and, before I know it, I've sprung a leak. "I'm sorry." I keep saying that over and over. Ed just wraps his arms around me and lets me leak all over him. Now that's a friend.

"It's okay." He gently pats my back

I pull back and wipe my eyes and nose on the sleeve of my shirt. "No, it's not. I've been acting

like an ass."

"Hey, you were allowed to act like one. I don't know many who wouldn't after that kind of shit went down in their lives."

"You sure?"

"Yep, but I'm happy to see my best bud coming back in all her goofy glory."

I smile a watery smile and he wipes my eyes.

"Okay, the moment is now over. I'm going back to bed and my girl, whom I have to say you have an unhealthy attachment to." He says getting up off the couch.

"Dude, she's hot and she walks around naked. I'm not a saint."

He scowls at me. I just laugh and slap his shoulder.

"Anyone else but you, Car, and I'd drop kick 'em."

"Uh huh. Go on back to your wench."

He smiles and cuffs my ear.

"Ed."

He stops.

"Thanks."

He just grunts that it's cool and goes back to bed.

I sigh. Rebuilding one's sense of self sucks.

-----

It's early. Well, it's 10 am, but dang for me that's early. I don't have class today so I get to sleep in, but because someone is pounding on the front door I'm awake now. I fumble with my glasses. Trying to navigate with eyes gummed up from sleep is no fun; I nearly kill myself tripping over Nappy. He hisses and runs into Ed's room.

"Coming!" I shout at the door. "If you're selling anything, you are so dead," I grumble. I unlock

the door and swing it violently open. "What<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

My brain freezes. Thankfully survival instincts take over and I slam the door shut.

I should have seen it coming. My life was going way too well. Therapy seemed to be working. I have a good job, a girlfriend, and life is going well. And I should have seen it coming.

I'm standing in front of the door, frozen, as the pounding starts up again.

Molly comes out yawning, in all her naked glory. "You going to answer that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's my ex."

"Oh. Which one?"

I turn and stare at her. "What do you mean 'which one'?"

"Well, celibacy hasn't really been in your vocab."

I pout. "I think you just called me a slut."

Molly laughs. "Answer the door already. Then we can make her go away."

"Fine, but you have to pay for my extra therapy."

With a shaking hand I open the door again. It's probably wrong of me but she still looks beautiful. Her red hair doesn't seem as red anymore; there are soft blond highlights coming through. Worried blue eyes look at me from behind her sexy glasses.

"Carmen, please just hear me out," she pleads.

"Anna." My throat closes up. Part of me wants to hear what she has to say; the other part wants me to bolt.

"Anna," Molly gasps from behind us.

Anna's gaze shoots behind me and she blushes. "I-I-I'm sorry if I'm interrupting, Carmen, but please<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I just need to talk to you."

"I'm sorry, Anna, but this is a very bad time," Molly spits out. She storms over to the door.

"Please don't ever come back here." With that, she slams the door shut.

God, she's naked but still manages to be very threatening. I'm not sure how she pulled it off. We stand there silently for a moment to see if Anna will knock again. When she doesn't, I turn and grin at Molly. "Would it be bad of me to tell you how hot that was?"

"Yes, but we'll let it slide just this once."

"Thanks."

"No problem. So that was the bitch Anna?"

"Yep."

"I expected someone taller."

We stand in silence for another beat.

"Coffee?" she asks.

"Sure."

I go about my morning routine with a sense of detachment. For some reason I can't get settled and I toy with the idea of seeing if my therapist is free. Somehow I convince myself that I am a big girl and can deal with the problem that is Anna. I slowly get ready and head off to work, looking over my shoulder the entire time.

-----

It's the attack of the T-shirts. I'm literally up to my knees in band and concert T's. I'm trying to do an overstock report, which was going well until I reached up for a box and knocked over three others right on top of me.

"Hey, Carmen! Whoa, what happened in here?" Maria asks.

"The T-shirt monster attacked. What's up?"

"There's some hottie up front asking for you."

"Okay, I'll be right up. I just need to find my feet."

"Kay."

As I approach the front desk, I'm not surprised to see that the 'hottie' is Anna. She really doesn't

understand the concept of giving up. I mean come on; she nursed a grudge against my sister and her friends for how long? Well, never mind the fact that she was right to do so.

"Maria, I'm going on break. I'll be out back if you need help."

Maria eyes me as she catches the flat tone in my voice. "Okay."

Not looking at Anna, I gesture for her to follow me. Once we step outside, I don't resist the urge to pull out a smoke and light up. I hardly smoke anymore; I think I've had this pack for a month and half. She frowns but has the good sense not to say anything.

"Did your private eyes have fun looking into my private life for you?" I bite out angrily.

She lowers her eyes. "I did use private eyes to find you," she admits.

We stand in silence. I roll my eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want¼ I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry."

My eyes narrow. "That's a broad and easy statement. What are you sorry for? Using me? Fucking up my life? Making me remember things my mind wasn't ready to handle?"

"Yes, all of it." A single tear falls and splashes on the cement.

I could pretend not to see it, but I don't. I gently lift her face and wipe her eyes. Some would say that it's a gentleness she didn't deserve, but April is making me remember what I use to be like and that Carmen was a decent caring human being.

"You fucked up my life just like my sister did to you. I guess we're even, or we could continue to perpetuate a vicious cycle where my family gets vengeance on yours and vice versa. We can have our very own Hatfield and McCoy feud," I joke without humor

She sighs but leans into where my hand touches her face and I drop my hand. "Carmen, I am sorry. I couldn't see anything other than getting justice for my sister's murder. Everything else became background noise, and I became so focused on that one thing that I hurt people, people that I care about. You and my step-sister especially."

"You want my forgiveness?"

"It would be nice, but¼" She trails off.

"But what?" I put out my cigarette.

"I really did like you and the time we spent together. I could have fallen in love with you." She looks at me and I can see the pain and the courage it took to say that. For a moment, I remember how much I did love her and how good we were together in bed. Sadly you can't make a



relationship from those things. I know that now.

"I did fall in love with you, and you hurt me. You hurt me so bad that I'm still recovering from it."

"I'm so sorry." She looks at me with tear-filled eyes. "Couldn't you love me again?" she pleads.

I suck in a breath and look away. This is so wrong. This can't be happening, but I still feel something for her. It's the ghost of emotion left over from happier times, triggered by a memory. It means nothing; it can't mean anything. Absently I grind my cigarette butt into the cement. "I'm with somebody," I say quietly.

"Oh," she breathes out sadly. "I wrote you, while you were in the hospital, I wrote you everything."

"I threw it away."

"Oh."

I turn back around. "I can't, and I couldn't even if I wasn't with somebody." I pause, looking at her. "Are you seeing a therapist?"

She looks away but nods.

"Me too," I admit. "We have a lot to deal with and that's really why we can't be together. We're too damaged by the same tragedies; we could never be a healthy couple."

She nods. "Yeah, I think¼ I think a part of me knew that, but still I hoped¼ I felt really happy with you."

I smile. "I'm glad. It makes some of our past history seem less shallow and I hope you find someone else who makes you feel like that, but it can't and it won't ever be me." I take her in my arms and hug her. "For what it's worth, I'm not really angry at you anymore. And¼ and I'm sorry for what my sister did; I never would have¼ if only I would have remembered sooner."

She hugs me back and I feel tears on my cheek. "I'm sorry for what Heidi did¼ I have a hard time reconciling her actions with the big sister who took care of me."

"I know."

"I wish¼um, thank you for at least talking to me. I think I have some sort of closure."

I stand back. "Me too."

"Would it be okay to maybe, sometime in the future, to email each other just to let each other know how we're doing?"

"I don't know - not for a while I think. We both still have a lot of healing to do."

"Okay." She steps back and we look at each other.

Don't ask me why I did it, but I leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. For me, I was saying good-bye to the past with that. I realize that it could have been interpreted as some sort of promise for the future. I hope she read it the same way I intended.

"Good-bye," I whisper and step back inside.

Maria looks at me in question.

"Just the past," I say cryptically.

"And what did Ms. Past want?"

"Closure."

"Ah," she says, nodding knowingly. "You both get it."

"I hope so," I mutter, going back to inventory.

-----

Flicking channels on the TV, I realize that I am so bored. Molly told Ed what happened so I've been fielding calls all day from Sue and Ed, making sure I'm okay. What they probably want to know is if I'm staying away from sharp objects. I sigh and stare at the phone. The one person I want to hear from hasn't returned my calls. Where the hell is April?

I'd just gotten up to fix some food even though I'm not hungry when someone starts knocking on the door. I stare at the door in fear. She wouldn't come back, would she? Summoning my courage, I go over and open the door. I let out a big sigh of relief. "April, I've been calling you."

"I know, and here I am." She walks in, shuts the door, and without any preamble, attacks my lips with hers. Mmmmmm, spontaneous kissage. I'm not complaining but this seems a little out of character. I go with the kiss, enjoying it for a few moments before pushing back for some air.

"Um, goodness knows I'm not complaining, but what was that for?"

"Shhh, too much talking." She kisses me again and starts guiding me backwards.

Okay, I'm really enjoying this take-charge side of April. I've never ever seen it before, but it does seem a little weird.

"Um, April, um¼" She gets my lips back. Prying them free again, I ask, "Um, did something happen today?"

"Too much talking, Carmen. Bed. Now."

That's when I realize she's maneuvered us into my room. Stunned, I'm totally passive as she gets my shirt off. She's going for my pants when I grab her hands. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with my girlfriend?"

She laughs. "I realized today how much I wanted you, and how much I didn't want to lose you to somebody else. So I figured I'd made you wait long enough." She shrugs and pushes me down onto the bed.

"Whoa. Time out," I pant as I grab for shirt or a sheet; I don't really care which. "Not that I'm not enjoying the aggressiveness, April, but what's this talk of losing me to somebody else? You are not going to lose me. I love you, even when you make us wait to have sex, because I know you care enough to wait for it to be right for both of us." And then I freeze when my brain realizes what it's just said. Oh my God! I told her that I loved her and it sounded really cheesy.

I finally get the sheet draped over my chest and all I can do is stare at her with wide eyes. She looks at me, stunned. "You do?"

"Do what?"

She slaps me on the leg. "Say it again."

I blush and lick my lips. My throat is dry. "I love you." It comes out in a nervous croak.

She smiles and then her face crumples in on itself as she starts to cry.

Holy crap, I broke her! Shit! Sitting up, I hold her while she cries, not really sure what to do. Then she pushes me away and starts whacking on me.

"How can you say that you love me?"

"I can say it because I do."

"Then why were you kissing that other woman today?"

"What? What other woman?"

"Don't play innocent. I saw you kissing that redhead." She sits up, glaring at me, and I start to get a clue why somebody was feeling amorous. "I got off work early and I came by the store to see if

you could take a break and grab lunch and you were talking with that woman and then you kissed her."

Shit. "April, that woman was Anna. That's why I've been calling you all day."

"That bitch. You're leaving me?" And she starts to cry again.

Oh God! Could I have made this any worse? "April, I am not leaving you. I love you."

"You say that but you were kissing your ex today."

"I know. But¼ shit¼ I don't know if this makes any sense but it was a kiss good-bye. There is so much shit that happened to us that's intertwined that¼ that it seemed like the right thing to do. I'm sorry. Look, I want to be with you. You're good for me and I'd like to think I'm good for you when I'm not being an ass."

"You're not leaving me for that psychotic bitch?"

I laugh. "No, I'm not."

"Good."

We lie down on my bed. For a while we just lie there and snuggle.

"You weren't just saying you loved me so I wouldn't be pissed at you?"

"No. Trust me. I had a mini freak out when the words came out of my mouth." I pause and then roll over to look at her. "I can't believe you were just going to sleep with me because you were feeling insecure."

"I was not feeling insecure," she huffs.

"Right. Still want to have sex?"

"Not right now. That was a lot of drama to process."

I kiss the tip of her nose. "I'm sorry. I don't think I've handled anything very well today."

She kisses me back and hands me my shirt. "Can we just snuggle? We can dissect today's events in the morning, but right now I want to feel close to you."

"We'd feel closer if I left my shirt off." I grin and wiggle my eyebrows.

She looks at me and I pout and put my shirt on.

"You're such a goof."

I wrap my arms around her and snuggle into her body, worming my nose through her hair, taking in the scent that is April. "Yeah, but I'm your goof," I breathe into her neck. She doesn't say anything but she does hold me tighter.

If I could have stayed awake, I would have caught the three stooges checking in on me; Sue, Ed, and Molly peaked in the room an hour later.

-----

Yawning, I reach and fumble for my glasses. Looking over, I see April is really here in bed with me; I didn't imagine it. Stretching out a hand, I brush the hair out of her face. I really hope we're okay. I seriously want to kick myself for kissing Anna although it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Oh well, you can't take back the past. I can only trudge forward and try to do the best I can. I crack a grin. How very Zen of me.

Getting up, I pull the covers back over April and tuck her back in. Yawning some more, I move into the kitchen and start some coffee. Ed stumbles in, his short hair sticking out in random angles. He opens the fridge, pulls out some orange juice, and takes a big swig right from the carton.

"Ewww, Ed, we all drink that."

"Wha?" He squints and sees me for the first time. "Oh, sorry." He fumbles for a clean glass. He sits down to finish drinking his juice.

I open the fridge, scoping out breakfast-type items to be cooked. I can feel Ed's eyes watching me. "Dude, spit it out," I say, not turning around.

"Your girl spent the night."

"Yep," I grunt, pulling out stuff for omelets. He's eyeing me again. "We needed to talk about Anna."

"Yeah?" he grunts back.

"You are a nosey shit," I grumble as I start cracking eggs. "Anna and I, well, I think we finally got some closure that we both really needed."

"Huh," he grunts, not believing that's all.

"Yep, and that's all that you really need to know about it. But you know, I feel really good. I

think I'm going to call Justin today."

Ed chokes on his juice. "You sure?"

"Yeah. And no, I don't think I'm being sudden or hasty about this. I think it's a bit overdue if you ask me."

He grins. "Cool."

"Whatever. What do you want in your omelet?"

"Do I smell food being cooked in this house?" Molly's sleep-roughened voice breaks into the kitchen.

"Yep, but only if you're wearing clothes."

I hear her footsteps stop and then retreat. A moment later she comes bounding into the room wearing a T-shirt and some of Ed's boxers. "Someone is in a good mood. Is this kitchen time in honor of your lady who's still sleeping in your bed?" Molly wraps her arms around me and peers over my shoulder.

"Partly. Here, will you watch the food? I should go get April up; I'm not sure what her schedule is for today."

"Okay." She grabs the spatula from me and starts poking at the eggs. "Carmen, don't forget you have that appointment with Glen this afternoon for your tattoo," she calls out as I make my way out of the kitchen.

I pour some coffee and head back to my room. She looks so cute sleeping there in my bed. Setting the coffee on the dresser, I sit down next to her on the bed. "April," I whisper. She grunts and turns over but doesn't wake up.

"Come on, sleepy head, wake up."

Her face wrinkles into a pout. "No. You can't make me."

"I could tickle you."

Her eyes blink open. "You're a big meanie."

Laughing, I lie back down next to her. "I'm not mean. I just don't want you to be late for work or class."

She stretches and makes a string of nonsensical vowel sounds. "I'm good until this afternoon. It's Wednesday, right?"

"Yep, it is."

"Good. You just have an evening class?"

I nodded my head. "Yeah, and I have an appointment to get a tattoo."

"Really?"

I nod shyly.

"Where are you getting it?"

"On my<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> the scar on my wrist. Molly designed it She said something about how it would help or<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I don't know."

She grabs my wrist and kisses it. "I'm sure it will be beautiful."

I blush, feeling slightly shy.

"Carmen, I want you to know, um, I love you too." She ducks her head shyly, examining the sheet in great detail.

Oh. Wow. I<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I'm blown away. Is this what she felt last night when I said it? What a mean thing to do to a person, but I think get it now. It's a funny feeling inside my body. I feel ten times larger than I was. I feel like I could swim across the ocean, and yet I feel extremely fragile all at the same time.

I start crying 'cause I'm not really sure how to process all this emotion. I thought I knew what love was; come on, I fall in love at the drop of a hat but this feels way different. Maybe this is a mature version of what I've felt before, I<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> I<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> really have no idea. God, I'm going to have to schedule an extra appointment with my therapist just so I can process this.

"Are you okay?" she asks worriedly.

I smile and gently kiss her on the lips. "I love you too, morning breath and bed head included."

"Knock, knock."

I turn, glaring at Molly. I was having a moment, an incredibly mushy moment, but a moment none the less.

"If you kids are going to be making with the bump and grind, you should probably close the door."

April and I both blush.

"Breakfast is ready if either of you care, or I could just shut the door for you."

"Um, could you just, ah, you know!"

Molly smiles. "One closed door coming up."

-----

I emerged from the shower, hair wet, big happy grin in place, to find an empty house. April hugs my waist from behind. "I think we scared them off."

She giggles and kisses my cheek. "Well, I'm not surprised. Somebody screams like their ass was set on fire and then later that same somebody was heaping a whole lot of praise on God."

"Yeah, well," I start, and then stop 'cause that's all I have for a comeback. Turning around in her arms, I kiss her. "Do I even want to know where you learned that thing you did with your tongue?"

"Um!" She blushes.

We look at each other and start laughing. "Come on, maybe there's something I can throw together for breakfast or I guess lunch rather."

I open the fridge. To find a plate of sandwiches sitting on the shelf with a note on top. I pull it out and read the note.

Car -

From all the noise I'm going to guess you're going to need some fuel.

Love

Molly

p.s. Ed says it's about time, and you better not be an ass 'cause he likes April.

"They think they're funny people but they're not," I grumble, tossing the note at April.

She reads it, chuckling. "Aww, Ed likes me. It's so hard to tell with him."

"Oh yeah, Ed loves you. He thinks you're really good for me, says I started to act like my old self when we started dating." I hand her a sandwich.



She takes it and starts munching. "Well, you sure weren't the DJ I met in the wall hole-in-the-wall bar in some small town, but I understand." She pauses. "Well, I do now."

"Sorry I made it so hard."

She kisses me. "Relationships are never easy, but I would see glimpses of the Carmen I wanted. I just had to wait for her to make her way back to the world, I guess."

"Thanks." I sit there, munching on my sandwich, basking in the afterglow, and overall just feeling really damn good. Then it hits me. April hadn't been waiting for her to be ready; she'd been waiting for me. I just look at her over my sandwich.

"What?"

"Nothing. You're just beautiful."

She blushes. "Thank you."

-----

I sit in the chair, trying to relax. Molly waves at me from the open door and I just smile weakly. The outline has been transposed on my skin and now he's getting the needle ready. I jump as it starts buzzing.

"You okay?" Glen asks.

"Yeah."

"That's the noise it makes. I just want you to get use to it."

"Okay."

He runs it a bit longer.

"Okay, I'm going to start. I won't lie to you; it's going to hurt, especially on the underside of your wrist. If you need to take a break, just let me know, but it's best if we try to get it done without stopping."

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, I'm ready." I'm ready to own my past and get ready for the future. I focus on breathing in and out as the needle touches skin. Ink is injected, covering the scars.

I won't lie. It hurts like a sonofabitch, and tears of pain are leaking liberally down my cheeks. Glen is top notch; he asks if we should stop and I tell him no. He checks me, and whatever he sees convinces him to keep going. After a certain point I don't really feel it anymore. I'm leaning back in the chair and I feel kind of floaty, like I'm only attached to my body by a few tenuous threads.

Suddenly the continuous bee stings to my flesh stop and I'm hurtled back into my flesh. Glen pats my leg and gets up. I blink, looking around.

"It can be a Zen experience if you're able to get past the pain, can't it?"

I nodded dumbly.

"All done. What do you think?"

I hold up my wrist. Amazing. The crescent moon scar that use to nearly circle my wrist is gone. In its place is music - life. I twist my wrist, humming the notes. "'What a Wonderful World' by Louis Armstrong," I breathe out.

Molly claps her hands excitedly, nearly dropping the juice bottle in her hand. "I knew you'd get it."

I smile at her. Turning to Glen, I say, "It's amazing the way you blended the colors. It's beautiful."

He smiles sheepishly. "Only the best for a friend of Molly's." He pulls out a tube of ointment, smears some over the new addition to my body, and then he gently covers it with some gauze.

As Glen leaves, telling me to get up whenever I feel like it, Molly comes in and sits down next to me.

"Here, I thought you could use some apple juice."

I smile and take the juice. After a sip I just look at her. "Thank you. This is the best thing. I'm glad you talked me into it."

She pats my head. "No problem, now you can help me work on Ed. I'm trying to convince him to get his nipples pierced."

I cough on my juice. That's a bit too much information, if you know what I mean.

-----

I had no problems with the tattoo. It healed up just fine, no infection or anything. I'm lying in April's bed, lightly dozing because she's been rubbing my head. We were watching a movie but a couple of scratches to the head and that was it for me. She's moved from my head and is now holding my wrist; she's getting her first real good look at my tattoo since I had it done. I can feel her index finger tracing the notes.

"It's really pretty."

I just grunt in agreement.

"When you said tattoo I was thinking something butchier, you know, like a flaming skull, or a labris, or¼"

I crack an eyeball and just look at her; she grins at me.

"And I like how he mixed in the red with the black. It makes it looks like the notes are on fire," she continues.

I yawn. "That's jazz for you; it's red hot."

She laughs and kisses my wrist, and then gives me back my arm. She snuggles down on the bed with me, picking at the collar of my shirt, and I open my eyes again.

"So¼"

"So," I echo.

"Um, Spring Break is coming up next month."

"Uh huh." I wake myself up some more; I can sense there's something on her mind. Oh God, what if she wants me to meet her parents?

"And I know you've been talking to your step-dad and I was wondering¼"

Okay, I wasn't expecting that curve.

"You were wondering," I prompted her to continue.

"Um, I was wondering if you would like to take a road trip home that week. You know, since you've been on this kick of facing your past and reclaiming your Carmen-hood and all."

God help us. She's picked up Carmen-speak. I grin and grab her hands. Kissing both palms, I look up at her. "You're so cute."

She sighs. "You didn't answer my question."

"In all honesty, I'm scared to go home," I tell her. She nods and hugs me. "But, I would like to go home and see my mom and Justin."

"Just call him your dad. You already think of him as your dad so just do it for crying out loud."

"I'd like to see my mom and dad. If things go well, maybe I'll even go see Olivia."

"Good for you." She hugs me.

"You're going with me, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Can I smack Olivia and Ashley around ¼ ooo, and Jen too?"

I laugh. "My hero. Yes, if they get out of line, you can knock them around."

She rubs her hands together. "Can't wait," she says with an evil grin.

"God, you are so bad. Good thing I love you."

"I'm not bad, but if you want bad you have 20 seconds to get naked and then I'll really show you bad."

I flush, and without further comment start stripping as fast as I can. Discussing trips home can wait until later.

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