

Remember Me?

A Novel by Brett Barney

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Prologue

The radio announcer's voice only partially permeated the heavy burden of thoughts that cluttered Edward's mind, but he subconsciously registered the report of record low temperatures. Outside, the drabness of the winter evening swallowed up the small college town. The winter of 1965 had been a cold one, and there appeared no signs of it warming.

Edward Penn drove his car the short distance from campus back to his apartment. He knew that the heater wouldn't warm up enough to pump out any real heat until he reached the parking lot of his home, but he had it on anyway. Even the frigid cold didn't seem to bother him today.

Edward had a new sensation of life in him. Reaching this point in his college career had taken immense work on his part. He wasn't as high a caliber student as his roommate, and had relied upon his ambition and labor to keep up with the idea of medical school. His future didn't look that inviting, and he knew his studies would only get harder from here, but all that had changed slightly this afternoon. Ray had been offered the chance to steer his efforts and ambition in a new direction, and one which had seemed right from the mere suggestion of it. He didn't even need to take the time to think about the offer, and accepted on the spot.

He climbed out of his car and walked slowly across the parking lot, enjoying the brisk feel of the freezing air outside. This lasted only a short time, before he could feel the blood in his cheeks crystallizing, and decided to step up his pace a bit.

Edward entered the warm apartment and opened his coat to shake off the cold. The radiating heat inside the home quickly soothed his chilled skin. The new snow and lack of clouds guaranteed that the temperature outside would continue plummeting. He quickly removed the large coat he wore and walked over to the warm fire.

"They say it'll keep dropping," spoke the man sitting on the couch in the living room. He could see the pain in Edward's eyes.

"I don't know if that's possible," remarked Ed. "I really hate the winters here."

The small apartment was modestly decorated, making it quite apparent that the two college students renting it were not interested in interior design. The shag brown carpet and clashing couches were humbly comfortable, and not meant to impress.

The living room had a small kitchenette attached to it, and across from that sat the bathroom. The apartment had a fine layer of dust lying across the coffee table, and an assortment of textbooks spread about. The floor looked as if it desperately needed a vacuuming.

"We ought to clean up around here," Edward suggested to his roommate. From the fireplace, Edward could see into each of the two bedrooms, both of which were a wreck. The

bungalow looked like the den of a savage animal. Only the smell of dinner in the air could hide the kaleidoscope of odors drifting out of the nooks and crannies in the apartment.

“This week’s been too hectic to take the time to clean,” answered the other individual. “With this big test coming up in physiology and the battery in my car dying, I hardly have time to take out the garbage flowing onto the floor. Maybe we’ll get to it this weekend.”

“Did you get your car running?” Edward asked.

“Yeah,” the other responded, “but as cold as it was, my hands kept sticking to the tools. The new battery cost me twenty bucks. I guess I’ll be eating noodles and watered down gravy the rest of the month. Why do you think it is that car problems always seem to arise at the coldest time of the year?”

“Murphy’s law, I suppose,” answered Edward. “Look at it as a personal challenge. Keeping an old car like that running in this kind of weather is a pretty good accomplishment. If you can do that, medical school will be a breeze.”

“I have enough things to get accomplished without that old car giving me any grief. If it wasn’t so cold, I would just have walked for the next few months.”

“I don’t think man is physically adapted to handle temperatures like the ones outside.”

“No reason to worry about that anymore,” answered the young student while he continued to study his book. “By this time next year, we’ll be down in California, studying for our midterms.”

“Maybe not,” answered Edward. “I was offered an interesting proposition today. I don’t know if I want to leave right now.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the other in surprise as he placed the book down on the coffee table and turned down the bright reading lamp at his side. “You’ve worked for four years to go to medical school. What could possibly keep you here after all that?”

“It’s not that simple, Ray,” answered Edward. “Dr. Evans asked me if I would like to stay behind for a while and do some research with him. He’s one of the best in the field today. Most people would die for such an opportunity. It would only be for a couple of years, then I would go on to medical school.”

“But why slow down?” asked Ray. “There’s more interesting things that you could learn than that old relic’s research. You’ve always dreamed of going to medical school. What makes you so sure you would get in if you applied again?”

“That’s not how I see it,” answered Ed. “If we go to school now, it will be all new for me. If I stick around here and work with Dr. Evans, I’ll have applied experience and some background compared to other students. There is so much that I could learn from such an experience. The research he does is astonishing. He’s working on some incredible stuff here. Just

the recommendation from him guarantees that you could get into any school you wanted. Later, when I'm ready, I'll go back to medical school and breeze through it."

"I don't understand, Edward," spoke Ray, "it's just research. I thought you hated research."

"At first I didn't like it that much, but the man's been doing some really intense things. He's making tremendous discoveries in the field of premature child rehabilitation. We've always wanted to go into obstetrics or pediatrics, and Dr. Evans is doing both. It's an excellent opportunity to learn things from an individual versus reading them out of a book. I'm getting addicted to the research. I don't want to quit at this point."

"But why all of a sudden? You've never talked about this before."

"If I stick around now," explained Edward. "I'll get my name on every piece of research he publishes from this point forward. He isn't asking me to stay on as a pupil, he's offering me the opportunity to stick around and become his partner. He'll pay me a pretty descent wage. He has all sorts of money from his research grants. I can build a name for myself before I even start medical school. He's really close to some incredible findings, I can feel it. I want to be a part of that. I crave the glory and I want to be part of the advancements."

"But what about our plan?" asked Ray with a pause. "We were going to do this together. We've been a team through it all. How do you expect me to get another study partner now?"

"You don't need me to help you. You're a much better student than I am right now. I need this time to help me iron down my concepts. I don't know if I'll be able to handle it if I enter school now. Working with an expert like this will give my education the boost I need."

"I realize the opportunity," assured Ray, "but you don't need any time to slow down. You're good at this stuff, you're a natural. Don't let that old man talk you into dropping everything so that he can work you endless hours for a small wage to do his research for him. He'll still be raking in the big bucks. Consider the difference between what he's offered you and the money you could be making five years from now."

"You know I'm not in it for the money," defended Edward. "He's a smart man, and I can't let the opportunity pass me by right now. I've been thinking about it all afternoon, and I've never been more sure of anything. I really want to do this."

"I just don't understand. You could do so much for people if you finished school and began a practice now. There's a real need for good doctors. Come with me so you can do some good for people."

"The work that Dr. Evans is involved with could save a lot of lives, a lot of new and helpless young lives. The medical field wouldn't be where it is today if it wasn't for the researchers making the advancements that treatments are based on."

“You’re right, Edward. This just all seems so sudden. Have you talked to your parents yet?”

“They weren’t sure where they would come up with the money anyway,” stated Edward. “I know they might be a little disappointed, but it will be better for all of us if I take advantage of this opportunity. I’m going to call them this evening and explain things to them.”

“Well, I guess congratulations are in order then. I never thought I would congratulate somebody for not going to medical school.”

“It’s not that bad, Ray,” assured Edward. “I’m excited to be able to do this. I’ve worked with the man for several months. The knowledge I’ve gained so far is priceless. I really want to stick around for a little bit longer. When Dr. Evans asked me, I knew right away what my answer was. I don’t want to sound emotional, but I felt something when I thought about it. There’s something big at work in all of this, and I can’t turn my back on it. I’m not thinking of it as quitting. I know I’ll go back and finish up someday.”

“It’s just been really nice having such a good friend as my study partner and roommate,” expressed Ray. “It’ll be really different trying to go to school without you around, Edward. It won’t be getting any easier in the future. This is just college, I don’t know if I can do medical school all alone.”

“You’re a natural, Ray. You’ll do great in medical school, probably top of the class. I still need a little bit more work. Someday when you have your practice all set up, I’ll come and work for you. We’ll be partners. I still remember our plans. Someday we’ll share a practice, and work together to bring lives into the world.”

“So this summer, you’ll just stay behind?”

“Yeah,” answered Edward. “I’ll start getting more involved working with him now, but this summer I’ll go full time. I might attempt to do a masters degree as long as I’m sticking around.”

“Well,” uttered Ray as he walked over to one of the kitchen cabinets and opened it, exposing a host of liquors inside. “I guess if we’re only going to be roommates for another four months, we should celebrate with a drink. I’ll break out some Brandy.”

Chapter One

Margaret lay sprawled out across her bed looking down at the deep green carpet. Time had long passed since she heard the busy hustling of voices in the large structure. Marriage and college had claimed the sounds of her older siblings, leaving her as an only child in her home. Only on holidays and an occasional weekend did the house seem complete as the entire family gathered to share their time together. It felt good at first, she thought, but after a period of time, she came to miss their presence here. The time alone gave Margaret the opportunity to think, and she often felt she spent too much time in some far distant place, not living her life of the present. During such times, she often found herself staring blankly into the distance, as she did now. Her mind drifted into other realms of tranquility, and she dreamed of wide open fields and large beautiful bodies of water to float aimlessly across.

Deer Hollow had none of these things. The small town felt like a prison. It sat in a small valley surrounded by enormous mountains. Margaret hated the enclosed environment created by the mountains. She feared crowded places terribly. The town didn't support a great number of people, and everyone knew their neighbors, as their parents had known their neighbor's parents. That didn't bother Margaret, she liked the town. She didn't like how packed in the town seemed. It could never grow much larger, for the boundaries already ran up to the sides of the steep hills on either side of the valley. The long canyon road winding up to the town helped to separate it from the outside world. Indeed, Margaret often wondered if life existed beyond the canyon, and months would sometimes pass between visits outside her small town. Recreation balanced out the negative aspects of the town, and Margaret utilized this asset to its entirety. Claustrophobia had driven her to breaking the boundaries of the valley at a young age, and her recreational activities provided for the often visited means of escape. The mountains were a back door, and something she could count on if the trapped feeling overcame her. Even as she rested on her bed inside the large room, her door hung open, giving her an exit in the event the walls began shifting in on her.

Ample sunlight had irradiated this side of the house throughout the day, making it quite comfortable in the spring evening. The white comforter, accented with floral patterns, still felt warm on the regions of dark colors and much cooler on the lighter areas. The variation of warm and cold spots across her bed tickled Margaret's skin and enticed her senses. Margaret loved the cool breeze, and welcomed it. It reached out to her, and caressed her warm skin with its sightless fingers, desperately coaxing her to the wonderful afternoon air outside. The caress fought a futile fight against the will of her imagination, which had captured her attention at the present.

She had cracked the window to get some fresh and humid air into the stagnant dry atmosphere of her own room. The forgotten act she generally executed in the morning had come back to haunt Margaret, bringing out the strange odors of the warm linens and carpeting as it trapped the heat inside the unventilated room. The gentle breeze slowly carried these scents away, replacing it with the smell of musty pine from the trees surrounding the valley. The sun now shone on the opposite side of the house, leaving her with only the remnants of the previous hours penetrating light to warm the bed she lay upon.

Margaret had only a few months until her eighteenth birthday. In two weeks, school would end for the year and she had another summer to look forward to. She loved the summers. During the long vacations, she escaped the secluded town to spend a few weeks with her aunt and uncle out in the large town of Harrison, a few hours away. There she could see for miles with only small hills to riddle the horizon. The days were hot, much to her disliking, but the open range more than made up for the miserable heat.

Margaret didn't even notice her friend Amy peak inside the doorway. Finding Margaret this way was nothing new for Amy. Amy almost expected to find her friend lying there, and it was the first place she looked as she glanced inside the room. Amy waited for some time, hoping that her friend would realize she had company without alarming her.

Margaret faced away from Amy, but Amy could see the side of her face easily. That look, the concentrated stare of deep thought, it was not an unfamiliar look to Amy. Even as children, she remembered that stare on her friend's face, and watched it change as they both grew. Through the years, the stare had taken on a more refined look, more precise and keen to the images and thoughts going through the complex mind of her friend. Margaret had arrived in the world one day before Amy. The two girls watched one another grow into the women they had become. A bond between them had forged even before they could walk, and nothing had ever threatened that bond, even to this day.

"Hey Margaret, whatcha doin'?" Amy spoke out in her timid and soft voice.

Margaret jumped in surprise at the intrusion. Her thoughts quickly escaped her mind as she returned to the reality of her surroundings. It took no time at all for Margaret to recognize the person in her doorway. She looked over at the long haired girl as she collected her strength to get up from the bed and speak to her. The interruption had disturbed an enjoyable thought, but brought her back to the reality of the day around her, and Margaret knew it was time to get back to the present.

Amy wore shorts, eager to enjoy the early spring sunshine. Her legs still showed the remnants of the long winter, though a little change of color had occurred in the pigments from a few afternoons of tennis the week before. From Margaret's position on the bed, Amy looked

taller, but it was just an optical illusion. Amy stood only slightly taller than five and a half feet, and was an inch and a half shorter if you didn't count her tightly curled brown hair.

She was much shorter than Margaret, who stood only a couple of inches short of six feet. Amy didn't possess the strength of Margaret either. Margaret could do more pull-ups than most of the guys in town and her strong, firm legs exhibited the years of exercise. Her shapely build didn't hide the many feminine features and her womanly curves. She was a lady as well as an athlete.

"Hey Amy, you scared me to death," spoke Margaret, trying to calm her speeding pulse.

Amy's frame looked much less threatening. Though she often joined Margaret in her recreational activities, she hadn't worked as hard to increase her muscle density and strength. Amy's mother had taught her the importance of good health, and her slim body and well-toned muscles demonstrated that she had taken that guidance seriously. She tackled fitness with much less ambition, however, than she pursued the other avenues for her future. Amy had always directed her efforts towards her schoolwork. She had a dream to become a doctor, and thus she conquered books, not mountains.

"I'm sorry," apologized Amy, looking around the spotless room. "I just thought I would stop by and see what you're doing. Your mom sent me up. I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"Oh, don't worry, I was just daydreaming," replied Margaret, pulling her hair from her face, allowing it to all hang to the opposite side. The soft honey blond hair looked thick and well cared for. Margaret took pride in her long hair, buying the best conditioners and treatments to care for it. "It's time I got up and did something anyway. What do you want to do?"

"Well, my mom's having dinner in about an hour. I figured that since your parents are going out with their friends, you might want to come join us. My dad's out on business and so it would just be the three of us."

"I think I'll take you up on that offer," answered Margaret.

"Great, I already asked your mom if she minded, and she seemed all right with the idea. We can leave whenever you would like."

"Let's go ahead and leave now. It's a shame to waste all this wonderful weather by sitting around in the house. I'd love to head over and mess around in your backyard."

"Yeah, maybe my mom will let us eat out on the back porch. The weather is so nice outside, and the bugs aren't bad yet. It will be the first backyard picnic of the year."

Margaret pushed herself up off the bed, and walked over to her closet, removing a light sweater and her tennis shoes. She wore a pair of sweat pants, which she had cut off about mid-thigh, and a T-shirt. She raised her arms up high above her, pulling the sweater down over the shirt. When she did this, the muscles in back and shoulders tightened up, displaying the total strength of her body. Amy didn't notice her friend's well-defined muscles. While easily observed

by those who might admire the girl, Margaret was not a weight lifter, and did not try to attain a large amount of muscle mass. Her strength served a purpose, and efficiency weighed heavier than mass in that purpose. Amy noticed her friend's grace and elegance as she walked. Several years of ballet and modern dance had taught both girls that, but Margaret applied that grace to everything she did, even scaling mountains. She sat down in the gliding rocking chair and pulled her shoes over the socks she wore around the house. Margaret certainly didn't fit the typical image of the female mountain climber.

The two girls left the room and headed down the stairs to the front door of Margaret's house. Margaret could hear her mother nervously pacing the floor in the kitchen, but couldn't see her as they reached the door. She yelled back a good-bye to her mother as she left the house. Her father had still not returned home from work, but Margaret knew he would arrive any minute. For a doctor, he kept his appointments quite well.

“Can I have some more muffins?” Amy asked her mother.

“Sure,” her mother answered as she handed them across the table to her daughter. “I forgot your father wasn't going to be home when I started cooking. There's plenty more where those came from.”

Amy didn't mind that her mother referred to the man as her father. After almost ten years of marriage to her mother, he had become the father figure in her life. She sometimes even referred to him as dad, but usually kept things on a first name basis. The relationship she had with her parents was a strong one, and she had never rebelled against the man whom her mother had chosen as a lifetime mate. Her mother had never forced the strong relationship between Amy and her stepfather, it just happened.

It didn't bother Amy that she had to share her mom with someone else after eight years of life as child in a single parent home. They did pretty well on their own, but Daren had filled a void that her mother needed. He never came between their impregnable relationship, and Amy saw him as a means to enhance their lives and a person to share the good times together. Her mother had even asked her approval before marrying Daren, something which meant a lot to a young girl afraid that she might get brushed aside. Not many daughters are flower girls in their mother's own wedding, and Daren was a good father to her.

“This is really good, Mrs. Jensen,” Margaret complimented, taking more chicken from the small outdoor table. All three ladies wore sweaters during the meal. They realized that the evening dinner on the porch was still a little premature for the early spring, but nobody seemed to mind. It felt good to get outside and enjoy the spring weather. Margaret had eaten many meals on this deck, and this year promised many more. She glanced around the scenery which surrounded her, realizing for the first time that these events she sometimes took for granted,

would slowly draw to a close. Her life had major changes ahead, as did Amy's, and soon the nights like this would only pop up as fond memories in her endless daydreams. The thought made her appreciate the evening even more.

The colors of life in the lawn had started to creep through the layer of dead vegetation remaining from a long winter. In time, the deep colors produced by the ample rainfall would span out across the well cared for backyard flower garden, which Mrs. Jensen held such great pride in. The small blades of grass weaving their way to the surface were only an indication of what lay ahead for the future.

"Thank you, Margaret, but please, call me by my first name. I don't know how many times in my life I've told you not to call me Mrs. Jensen. It makes me feel really old. I'll have to quit inviting you over if you keep making me feel like an old woman."

Margaret smiled at the reminder. Amy's mother always had a fun sense of humor, and Margaret thought of her more as one of the girls than her best friend's mom. Margaret didn't like to upset the woman, but enjoyed her friendly teasing. The accidental usage of etiquette was the fault of background, and not intended to offend Amy's mother. She had much respect for the woman.

Mrs. Jensen was right. As long as Margaret could remember, she had told Margaret to refer to her by her first name. It was quite different from her own home, where you addressed people in a respectful voice. Her father told her that respecting adults meant using proper titles when speaking to them. Her parents had taught the children proper etiquette at a young age, and old habits die hard. At Amy's house, things were much more laid back.

Mrs. Jensen always did seem younger to Margaret. After all she had gone through in her life, she still looked at the world with a smile. She took good care of herself and had an incredible figure, especially for someone in her late thirties. Margaret sometimes teased Amy that guys came to visit her just to get a look at her mother. She and Amy could stand next to one another and look like sisters, and many people mistook them for just that. They were about the same size.

The sun began to creep down below the mountains in the distance. Margaret knew there wasn't much time left before the light would cease altogether. The air grew cooler as evening set in across the small valley. Margaret didn't mind though. She enjoyed the cool spring evenings. The addition of a light jacket to one's wardrobe could keep you warm here, and the darkness helped to hide the mountains which surrounded the valley. Millions of tiny stars would soon cover the clear sky above, and starlight felt romantic.

Margaret reached over and patted the dog that sat beside her on the deck. The loyal animal had remained there patiently for some time, making it apparent that he wished to taste some small morsels of the food from their plates. Amy noticed also, and handed him a small

piece of the pork chop bone to gnaw on. Moments later, the excited creature ran off joyfully in the yard to enjoy his reward.

“It’s a good thing that the evenings here are cool enough to take some of the heat from the day out of the houses,” Margaret noted. “With as warm as it’s been this last week, our house is blistering hot during the day. Looks like it’ll be another scorching summer.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” agreed Amy. “I’ve had to live all my life with my bedroom receiving direct sunlight for the majority of the day. What do you say, mom, after five years of begging, are you going to let me spend my last three months at your house in the basement where it’s cool?”

Amy’s mother looked at her sternly, and gave her an unrelenting smile. Amy knew she had failed in her attempt again. Amy glanced at Margaret who watched them both. The look on Amy’s face assured Margaret that the girl did not expect her mother to budge on this one.

“I’ve tried for years to get her to let me move into the basement,” Amy explained. “I’ve used every approach, but still my mom insists on having me sleep in the room right next to her own. We have all sorts of space downstairs in the basement where I could sleep. She could turn my room into an office for herself and then we would all have more privacy.”

“I’m sorry, Amy,” answered her mother as she stood up to carry some of the dishes back into the house. “But even when your married, and bring home your husband and kids, I’m going to have you all sleep in your old room. I want you as close to me as I can during these last few months. After that, there will be hundreds of miles separating us, but until then, you’ll stay on the same level of the house as I am.”

“It was worth a try,” noted Margaret. “My room gets only the morning sunshine. But being on the second story keeps it fairly warm during the summer.”

Margaret and Amy helped carry the rest of the dishes inside the house. The three worked together to fill the dishwasher and a few minutes later retired to the living room to relax. Amy’s mother picked up her book beside the couch and began searching for her page. While her husband was away, she had the extra time to read her steamy novels, without him teasing her about them.

“So what are the two of you doing tonight?” she asked without looking up from her book.

“We’re gonna go hunt down the guys,” answered Amy. “Maybe try talking them into a movie and getting something to eat afterwards.”

“Yeah,” agreed Margaret, “but, we haven’t planned anything. We could end up doing just about anything. You know Deer Hollow, there’s always something going on,” she continued sarcastically.

“Just don’t stay out too late,” reminded Amy’s mother. “You aren’t in college yet. We still have curfews for high school students.”

“Only two more weeks, mom,” Amy scorned her mother. “Then you’ll wish you’d never hassled us our last year of school.”

“What are you talking about?” kidded Mrs. Jensen. “Until you start college, you’re still considered a high school student to me. You still have another three months of my harassment before you can consider yourself free from parental guidance.”

“We’ll be home before eleven, Mrs. Jensen,” assured Margaret as the two girls walked out the door to Amy’s car.

Margaret sat down at her small desk that evening, after getting home fairly late. Her parents had already gone to sleep, leaving the house as an empty solitude to welcome her home. The soft glow from the tiny lamp provided the small amount of light she needed for her evening task.

She opened her top desk drawer and removed the small bound book from inside. She picked up her pen and began to write down the daily events in her journal. She had kept a journal ever since her mother taught her how to write. It had become a ritual to her. She began the entry the way her mother had taught her as a child.

“...Thursday, May 20, 1993

Another less than exciting Thursday night in the town of Deer Hollow. If it weren’t for Amy and her friendship, I swear I would go insane. She keeps things interesting and always seems to make me smile.

I don’t know why I complain so much. I know I’ve got things pretty good here. We stopped by to see Jeremy, but he was busy studying for a final exam in his Biology class. I can’t believe he has a final. It seems so strange to me. I guess it isn’t that odd, after all, he is still a Junior. Only the seniors are immune to finals the last quarter of the year.

Our plans to see a show were shattered by Jeremy’s study time, so Amy and I went out for ice cream by ourselves. We drove around trying to find a volleyball game or something exciting going on at the park, but nobody was out tonight.

We stopped by to see Brandon. He was working at the restaurant and didn’t get off until about ten, so Amy and I just went down to the park and sat around swinging by ourselves most of the night. We did all make plans to go up in the canyon tomorrow evening. We might even do a little bit of repelling as long as we’re up there.

It will at least give Jeremy and me a chance to be alone. I haven’t had the opportunity to spend much time with him lately. I don’t know what will become of us in the next few months.

We seem to be headed in different directions, and I don't want to be locked in a relationship back home while I'm away at college. I think we both know that an ending is inevitable.

I know it will be the best for both of us. I've seen him checking out some of the other girls at school lately. I think he's looking for some space, and I'm fairly sure he isn't the sort of guy I want to spend the rest of my life with. We've had our good and bad times, but he isn't what I dream about when I think of myself in twenty years. I like him a lot, but I don't feel like I'm in love with him.

I want to see some other guys too. I don't want anything physical, I just want to play the field some more. I have lots of guy friends besides Jeremy, I just haven't ever spent time alone with them because of him. Maybe if we do break up, I can get to know some of them better, but I guess I'm not really looking forward to a breakup. He's been a good friend and somebody whom I can talk to openly. I'll really miss him when it ends.

Anyway, there isn't very much else to report today. School is the same old dull place as it always has been. Just another couple of weeks and it will all be over. Then my life as a dependent person begins and I finally get to leave the routine life of the past eighteen years..."

Margaret sat next to Amy while Brandon and Jeremy tried desperately to light the fire. The two girls laughed as their boyfriends tried to demonstrate their rugged outdoorsman abilities. Five minutes had passed since they started trying to get the flames going.

"It's a good thing we don't need that fire for heat," Amy chattered to the two embarrassed guys. Neither of them responded to the remark.

Margaret stood up and walked over to the mound of sticks the two attempted to light. She pulled out a book of matches from her fanny pack and rearranged the sticks so that more air could get to them. Amy watched patiently while trying to get the dirt out from underneath her fingernails.

Brandon and Jeremy backed away, frustrated with their efforts and unwilling to argue with her. The look on their faces proved that they wanted her to fail at their task, but Margaret made the task look effortless. They watched with disbelief as several of the twigs began to burn and the flames slowly spread throughout the pile of kindling.

Margaret set up the larger sticks in a lob-sided arrangement, using the slight breeze to feed more air to the growing flames. The smoky campfire soon covered up the strong pine and aspen odor of the mountains. The color of the landscape around them grew dull as the evening clouds filtered out the rays of the setting sun.

The cool mountain air had a hint of a chill, and the group welcomed the heat from the fire. They all wore denim jeans and climbing gear for the evening adventure, but it didn't

insulate very well. The sounds of the dry wood cracking as the temperature rose interrupted the stillness of the wilderness. In only minutes, the blaze raged nicely before the four teens.

“Don’t feel bad,” Amy assured the two defeated boys. “Margaret could start a fire by rubbing two ice cubes together if she needed to. You were way out of your league.”

The guys just smiled back at the smart comment. Margaret remained silent, not wanting to rub any more salt into their wounds. She didn’t need anyone to tell her that she could do anything a guy could do. Margaret had developed her love for the outdoors long before most kids realized that forests and mountains surrounded the small town. She looked up as Amy walked over towards her and leaned up to whisper something to her.

“Watching my mountain man there has me feeling really romantic,” Amy whispered so neither of the guys could hear her. “I’ve got a case of the chills. How about you and your honey leave me and Brandon alone for some quality time together?”

“You don’t have to ask twice,” Margaret remarked as she walked over and grabbed Jeremy by the hand, leading him away from the small campsite. “Come on, Jeremy, let’s take a walk.”

Brandon smiled as he watched the two leave the campsite. He turned around to find Amy spreading the blanket out on the soft ground beside the fire. Only the two of them remained in the quiet, secluded campsite.

Margaret led Jeremy back up the trail about a quarter mile until they reached the ledge of the cliff they had repelled down a few hours earlier. The sun had dropped halfway behind the mountains in the distance, and the view was spectacular.

Jeremy walked up and sat a few feet away from the ledge. He stood taller than Margaret, but never seemed that big to her. He looked cute, she thought, though he wasn’t the hunk that she might find on the cover of her favorite magazines. They were friends above all else, and their romance had stemmed from that friendship.

Margaret followed Jeremy and had a seat beside him. He had his eyes focused at the scenery off in the distance. She could tell that something was on his mind. She had anticipated this talk for some time, but still felt nervous about it. Over the years, she had learned to trust him, and knew that she couldn’t lie to him if he looked her in the face.

“What’s going to happen to us after you graduate?” Jeremy asked, without looking over at Margaret.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “It complicates things, and I’m not sure what I want. It would be really hard with me away at school and you here alone. I don’t want a relationship dependent on letters and phone calls. I want to enjoy life.”

“I know what you mean. I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. I’ll really miss you when you’re gone. I don’t know any other girls like you. Most girls hate camping and hiking. I don’t know of any other girls around here that will drop off the side of a cliff with only a rope to keep them from dropping to a gruesome death.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“As it was intended,” he assured her. “Why is it that you like climbing so much? I know for a fact that you’re not a lesbian, so you aren’t trying to show off your masculine side or anything.”

“I think it’s because of the danger. I like the feeling of holding my life in my own hands. It’s some sort of thrill I get from knowing that I have complete control of my destiny. I like fighting against the elements of nature. In all honesty, I have to confess, I’m scared to death of repelling off cliffs.”

“Oh, come on now,” he uttered in an unconvinced tone.

“No,” she insisted. “I mean it, I hate them. The only reason I do it is to prove to myself that I’m stronger than my own fears. I have nightmares about climbing all the time.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Even before I started climbing, I had nightmares about it. Some of them are so real that I wake up in a cold sweat from the pure terror of it. One in particular, I’ve had more than a dozen times. It’s a reoccurring dream, and it scares me to death.”

“What happens?”

Margaret hesitated for a moment. Her dreams were something she didn’t generally talk about. She knew that some of the people she went to school with found her odd. Most girls as beautiful as she wouldn’t dream of spending the day in the woods. She didn’t like feeling different, and wanted to fit in. The idea of sharing this information didn’t appeal to her. This was Jeremy though, and after Amy, he understood her more than anyone else. They had shared some intimate times, and she knew that he would understand.

“I’m hanging on to this rope, and I’m almost to the top of this huge cliff,” she explained, speaking softly and rather seriously. “The bottom is over a hundred feet below me, but the rope isn’t long enough to lower myself down. The climb above me is a smooth surface, and it’s wet on top of everything. The only way to reach the top is to climb up the rope with my hands. I’m fighting just to hang on to the rope, and I can hardly see because it’s so hazy and almost pitch black.

“There’s a flash of brilliant light, and I can see a figure standing at the top of the cliff above me. I call out for help, but whoever it is, they just stand there, waiting for me to fall.

“Then there’s another flash of light, and I’m standing where the figure was, except now I’m looking back at myself hanging onto the rope below. I hear my screams and begin trying to

pull the rope, but I watch myself sliding slowly down the cliff, and there isn't anything I can do. I keep pulling the rope towards me, but the more I pull, the farther I watch myself slip down the side of the cliff.

"Then the light flashes again and I'm back against the cliff looking up at the dark figure again, except this time the rope has been cut, and I'm falling helplessly to the ground below. The last thing I see before I wake up is another flash of light, and this time I can make out who the figure at the top of the mountain is. It's me standing there. The strangest thing about the dream is, I'm never sure which of the two people in the dream is actually me. It's really freaky."

"You aren't kidding. You're really strange, Margaret."

"What do you mean?"

"You have dreams like that, and then you still come up here and climb down the sides of these cliffs?"

"That's when I get the most pleasure out of climbing. It's when I'm scared out of my wits and I get up in the morning and come up here to prove to myself I'm still not afraid of some wild dream."

"I don't know, Margaret," Jeremy spoke softly, "it almost sounds like your subconscious is trying to tell you something. They say that your dreams sometimes have some deep meaning to them. Maybe your dreams are trying to send you a message."

Margaret paused at the remark. She regretted sharing her dream with him. His reaction wasn't what she had hoped for. Even Jeremy made her feel different. She didn't let it bother her too much, and decided to try to change the subject.

"I think you're the one who's strange," Margaret smiled over at him. "You watch to much science fiction. I don't believe in omens or *deja vu*. I think it's just my subconscious trying to make me behave. Somewhere inside me, there must be a tiny little man who's afraid of heights."

"I don't think there's any tiny little men inside of you. Maybe a little renegade blood that gives you courage, but not little men."

Margaret looked over at her friend and placed her lips on his. The deep red color protruding from the sun gave the ground around them a light glow. The sun gently disappeared beyond the horizon as she stared into his eyes and pushed him gently back, allowing him to lie down against the soft earth. She rolled next to him and nibbled lightly on the lobes of his ears. Jeremy was a good kisser. She didn't really want to continue the conversation, and instead chose to end it on the compliment. This was the way she enjoyed spending time with him. Even when he hurt her feelings, he had a way of making her feel good about herself in the end.

Chapter Two

Midnight found Amy and Margaret cuddled up in their sleeping bags in the family room of Margaret's home. Margaret's parents had gone to bed several hours earlier, leaving the two girls alone. They had watched several videos before shutting out the lights in the room and trying to fall asleep.

With Margaret's older brother and sister away from home, only the sounds of an automatic sprinkler out the back window, spraying its mist across the lawn, disturbed the tranquility. Margaret's parents slept in the master bedroom upstairs and on the other end of the house, leaving the girls with plenty of privacy. It was the times like this that Margaret didn't mind having the house to herself.

Even at this late hour, the girls remained alert and full of energy. They had eaten a smorgasbord of sweets and drank several liters of soda. The sugar high they soared on wouldn't allow them to fall into slumber.

The two teens tried to remain still in their sleeping bags, but found themselves chatting for several hours about their dreams after high school and the boys they dated. It didn't take much time before one friend posed the big question to the other. Amy managed to ask first.

"Do you think you're in love with Jeremy?" she asked Margaret.

"I'm not sure," answered Margaret truthfully. "I enjoy spending time with him, and he's a nice enough guy, but I'm not sure I'm in love with him. I don't feel like I always want to be with him or anything. When I first started dating him, I thought I was, but after the initial excitement wore off, the feelings died down some. I like spending a lot of my time with my other friends. So I don't really think so. How about you, have you ever been in love?"

"I've never felt that close to anybody."

"What about Bryce? Didn't you have any feelings for him?" Margaret asked, digging into her friend's secrets. The two girls had shared secrets all their lives, and they discussed their feelings rather openly. Margaret liked knowing that there was always someone there to talk with.

"There were feelings with Bryce, but they were physical."

"Don't say that, Amy, physical sounds like a guy word."

"Well, let's call it curious then. I wanted to experience some things, and I knew Bryce was safe to try them with. He was really shy and hadn't ever been with anyone before. He was curious too. We took our time together and fooled around a little bit, but it was more to experience some things than trying to bond with one another. I don't think I ever loved him, at least not beyond just a friend. I wasn't even that upset when we quit dating, and they say you never get over your first love."

“Did you feel anything special when you were with Bryce?”

“When you say special, do you mean physically special?” Amy asked, not sure if their minds focused on the same thought.

“No,” Margaret answered, not wanting to embarrass her good friend. “I mean, did you feel like you were sharing something with him that you would never share with anyone again? He was your first time, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, Bryce was my first time. I think that’s part of the reason that I didn’t feel very bad when we split up. The things we did together were wonderful, and I couldn’t have asked for someone who made me feel more comfortable about it. He was gentle, and kind, and I knew we were both doing things for the first time together. It’s just that there was something else missing. I’m still not quite sure what it was. I haven’t even come close to sharing anything like that with Brandon. I want the emotional feelings as well next time. It has to be my heart that tells me that the time is right next time, not my desires for some physical pleasure.”

Margaret felt envious of her friend. Amy knew exactly what she wanted in a guy, and could live without the physical need, but Margaret still felt so unsure. She had found someone who understood her in Jeremy, but their relationship didn’t compare to what Amy and Bryce had shared. Jeremy was younger than Margaret, and neither fought for control of the other. She always considered their relationship equal, except at times of intimacy. At those times, Jeremy became the aggressor, and took the lead on things. Jeremy was gentle and kind with her, like Bryce with Amy, but Margaret always felt that his instincts about intimacy surpassed her own. He knew how to do things, even their first time together, and that sometimes took the excitement of the unknown away from her.

Jeremy did have one thing which Margaret appreciated about him. Margaret could depend on him. They had made a pact, to trust one another with everything. She never doubted him. If either wanted to end the relationship in the hopes of finding someone else, they would first tell the other, alleviating the possibility of deception. Times had changed, and casual contact was a thing of the past. Promiscuous attitudes could prove deadly, and Margaret didn’t like taking chances. She often wished she had waited before experiencing the things she shared with Jeremy. It felt right at first, but she knew she didn’t really love him now. The pressures to experiment with your body were everywhere, and she had fallen victim to intrigue. She just hoped that someday she would find the guy who could offer her the true fulfillment, but at this time, contentment kept her faithful, and she didn’t want to give up Jeremy.

“That’s kind of what I think Jeremy and I have going now,” Margaret finally answered. “We sometimes get a little bit carried away, but usually we just go out to have some fun around town. We try things together if we get really interested about something we heard about, but sex isn’t brought up that much. I think we both worry about me getting pregnant. When your dad’s

the local obstetrician, you get to hear about all sorts of stories about young girls getting pregnant.”

“Like my mom?”

“Yeah,” answered Margaret, realizing what she had just said. “Like your mom, I suppose. She’s a neat lady to accomplish so much after she went and had you on her own.”

“Yeah, mom did pretty good for herself. I like Daren, he’s a pretty neat stepfather. Most ladies who did what my mom did at that time never married, or their husbands are real losers. Mom says she doesn’t regret having me, but I think she sometimes wishes things had worked out differently. She was pretty dedicated to finish her degree, once I started school. That’s quite an accomplishment for her to go back to school at her age and get her bachelors degree from college.”

“I really like your mom,” agreed Margaret. “She’s so down to earth. My parents are great, but they’re really old fashioned. I don’t want to wait that long before I have any kids. Your mom’s so young, and she lives in the present. My dad’s a gynecologist and I can’t even feel comfortable talking to him about sex. Mom’s so old fashioned, that she never even mentions it.”

“My mom was always really frank about those things,” explained Amy. “I know it’s because she doesn’t want me to end up in the same predicament as she did. She lived alone for a lot of years. She didn’t meet Daren until she went to college. She was really lonely. Growing up with her was kind of like having a mom and a close friend at the same time, and she shared a lot of her feelings that most mothers might hide.”

Margaret could tell that something bothered her close friend. She hoped that she hadn’t upset Amy by bringing up the subject. Margaret and Amy shared parents. It was Amy’s mother who talked with Margaret about her body, and answered some really embarrassing questions when she didn’t know where to turn. Margaret loved her own parents, but there was a sense of honesty in everything that Amy’s mom said, and she seemed easier to talk with. She had never known anyone like the woman, and truly admired her.

“It must be neat when you can talk to your mom about everything.”

“Almost everything. There’s still one thing she never would talk to me about. I sometimes wish I could know, but I don’t want to press her about it. I know it upsets her.”

“What’s that, Amy?”

“I’ve always wondered who my dad is. She never says anything about him. I brought it up once and it really upset her, but the thing is, I’m almost eighteen years old. I think I’m old enough to know who he is. I’m just too afraid to ask.”

“Is she the only person who knows who he is?”

“Yeah. Even when she told my grandparents that she was pregnant, she wouldn’t tell them who the father was. She didn’t want anything to do with him. I asked my grandmother once if she knew who he was and she said that mom never uttered a word as to his identity.”

“Wouldn’t it be on your birth certificate?” asked Margaret.

“Your dad had him listed as anonymous on the birth certificate. It isn’t a true certificate, but a substitute like they give to adopted kids. I think when I turn eighteen, I have a legal right to know, but I don’t want my mom to know I’m searching for him.”

“That must be really hard not knowing who he is. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Not unless you wanted to break into your dad’s records,” Amy joked.

“Do you want to?” Margaret asked in a more serious tone.

“We can’t do that, Margaret. Can you imagine the trouble we would get into if your parents found out? I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“My parents would never know. My dad snores so loud that they wouldn’t hear us if we ran a truck through the living room window. His office is downstairs and nobody else is home. They’re probably long asleep by now. I know where he keeps the keys to his file cabinets. He probably has all the information about you that we need. All we have to do is walk down the hall and take a look.”

Amy lay inside her sleeping bag for what seemed like a long time before she responded. She had never thought to sneak through the records of Margaret’s father to find out the identity of her dad. Amy shared the same respect for Margaret’s parents that she did for her own. Sneaking around was something uncommon to her character, but it was a chance to find out without hurting anyone. The opportunity had snuck up and surprised her, leaving her with little time to weigh the good and bad points of each. Given time to think about it, her conscience might change the outcome of her response, but shock had forced her to overlook her conscience. The shock soon surpassed as the interest and excitement overcame her. She started out of her bag just seconds later.

“Let’s go,” Amy whispered.

“You don’t need to whisper, Amy,” Margaret remarked. “My parents will never hear us. Follow me.”

The two girls climbed out of their bags and walked quietly down the hallway to the study. It felt odd sneaking around in their nightshirts, but exhilarating at the same time. Margaret opened the door and the two girls walked in and turned on the small desk lamp. The lamp lit up only a small area for reading and added very little light to the rest of the room. It lit the room enough for the girls to make out the larger objects in the room. Margaret reached into the middle drawer of the desk and pulled out a set of keys from the back.

Margaret had seen her father place the keys in the desk a hundred times, but for some reason felt sinister taking them out for her own use. Her dad had always told her that his files were off limits, and she had always obeyed his wishes, but this was different, her best friend had a problem that she could help sort out. It all seemed harmless enough, and Amy's mother didn't want to talk about it. This was Amy's only source of the knowledge. Margaret wouldn't let guilt keep her from helping out her best friend. She knew that if the tables had turned, Amy would do the same for her.

She picked up the desk lamp and walked over to the file cabinet, placing the key inside the lock. The key turned with ease and the squeaky drawer slid open. Margaret set the keys on the desk behind her as the two girls began shifting through the folders for Amy's name.

"This is the wrong drawer. They're alphabetical, but this doesn't go far enough," explained Amy.

Margaret used the keys to open the rest of the drawers in the file cabinet. She started from the bottom, pulling open drawers and shifting through their contents for Amy's last name. Margaret noticed her fingers felt sticky, and realized that they trembled from nervousness. She didn't know what they would find, but hoped it would help Amy.

"I can't find the file here, Amy," explained Margaret. "It's probably listed under your mom's maiden name."

She hadn't thought of that either. Amy finally located her file and pulled it out. The two girls walked over to the desk quickly, and set it beneath the lamp. They opened the file and began to read it. They found many papers inside the manila folder with information about Amy's health as a child. There were also many legal papers certifying the existence of the child. It took some time to sort through everything.

"You were born with jaundice, Amy," Margaret chuckled as she read over a copy of notes her father had taken after the delivery. "You cried immediately after exiting the birth canal and it says you look like a perfectly healthy baby, except that you were yellow."

"That's quite common for children," defended Amy.

"Here's a copy of your birth certificate right here, Amy," Margaret spoke, holding up a legal document.

"That's the one my mom had your dad make up for me," Amy explained. "It's just like what they give to adopted kids so they won't know that they were adopted unless the parents want to tell them. There should be another document that has the actual information on it."

"That's funny, Amy, this is the same kind of birth certificate that I have," Margaret noted in an odd voice.

Amy held up another paper similar to the one Margaret carefully looked over. "This is it," Amy explained as she studied it for some useful information.

Margaret set down the paper she held and looked over at the document held by Amy. The two girls read down the page until they reached the information they wanted. There on the page was the name Amy had never known. It didn't deliver the shocking blow they had expected.

"Does it sound familiar?" Margaret asked.

"No," Amy remarked. "Who do you think he is?"

"Looks like he's your dad," Margaret answered.

"Isn't there anything else about him?"

"Just some of the notes from my dad's first exam with your mom. The rest of it is all documents and medical information," answered Margaret.

"What does it say in the notes?" pleaded Amy.

"It just says that the mother didn't want the name of the father disclosed to anybody and specifically asked that he never repeat it. It says that he plans to honor her wishes and will not release these documents unless ordered to by a judge. He also says that he explained the reasons why he needed the father's name and what might happen if a court order was released asking that the name be disclosed."

"So I'm legally entitled to know this information?" asked Amy.

"Not until you're eighteen."

"Do you think we're wrong for sneaking through these records like this, Margaret?" Amy asked in a regretful voice. "I feel really guilty about it, but I think I'm entitled to know."

"I don't feel that guilty about it. Now you know. That's what we wanted, wasn't it?"

"All we know is a name. I have no idea of how to contact him, or even where to begin. All I have is the real birth certificate with a name I've never heard written on it."

"This puzzles me," uttered Margaret, not really paying attention to the emotional dilemma her friend went through. "Your other birth certificate looks just like the one I have. Why do you think my dad didn't give me my real one?"

"Well, to be honest with you, Margaret. You don't look at all like your brother and sister," Amy answered, trying to look serious, but cracking a smile and giggling as Margaret looked up at her.

"I want to look at my file," explained Margaret, still completely serious about answering her question.

"Come on, Margaret, you don't think you're adopted, do you?"

"No," answered Margaret. "How could my whole family hide something like that from me for my entire life. I just want to know why I've never seen my real birth certificate."

Margaret left the desk with the lamp and began shifting through the top file cabinet drawer, searching for her name. She located the file and pulled it out, returning to the desk where

her friend waited. Amy had already returned the documents from her file to the folder the way she had found them, and set the document to the side.

“Did you find it?”

“Yes,” answered Margaret. “But it isn’t very heavy.”

The two girls opened up the folder to find three papers. Margaret expected more, like Amy’s file contained. She glanced through the papers quickly, hoping to discover why her father didn’t give her the real birth certificate. The first document was a copy of the paper Margaret had always accepted as her birth certificate. It listed her parents just as she expected it would. The two girls quickly set it aside to look at the next two papers.

The second paper looked just like the one that listed Amy’s father and mother on it. The paper caught the two girls by surprise with the names this paper had listed. The bottom areas which should have had the names of Margaret’s actual parents were both labeled with the word none. Amy started to giggle when she read the document.

“And all this time I thought you were real,” teased Amy. “Now I find you’re just a figment of my imagination.”

“It isn’t funny, Amy. I don’t understand.”

Margaret set the document aside and read the final page. Margaret read the memo aloud, still unsure of what she had found. The paper was a hastily typed up note, and didn’t look very professional.

“Margaret Anne Drake is the product of the L.S.A.U. project. This project was headed by Dr. Edward Penn. The information about this project is considered to be the property of Dr. Raymond Drake, an aid to Dr. Penn in the experiment. For legal reasons, no information about this project can be disclosed until the eighteenth birthday of Margaret Anne Drake.”

Amy smiled as Margaret looked up in astonishment. “I never thought your dad had such a funny sense of humor. I wonder if he left the same kind of thing in your brother and sisters’ files.”

Margaret laughed to herself as well. She thought it seemed rather funny that he would go to such lengths for a gag. “I guess it serves its purpose. He obviously didn’t want me snooping through any of this, and had the foresight to expect that I would someday. I wonder where he keeps my real birth certificate?”

“Probably at the office in the clinic,” suggested Amy. The sound of a toilet flushing from upstairs startled the two girls’ tranquility. They threw the papers back inside the folders and returned them to the file cabinet.

Margaret felt her heart beating hard against her chest, realizing what would happen if her father caught her. She had never given her parents a reason to doubt their trust in her. Suddenly, she felt awful for what she had done. In seconds, they had locked the file cabinet and replaced

everything as they found it. They shut out the light and quickly cracked the door to see if anyone had ventured downstairs.

Finding the hallway empty, the two girls ran softly down the hall to the family room and slipped inside their sleeping bags. Margaret wondered what she would say if her parents came down. She could hear her heart pounding, and wondered if they could as well. Margaret and Amy held perfectly still for several minutes, with only the sounds of young girls trying to catch their breaths, disturbing the silence of the night.

“I think someone just got up to use the bathroom,” Margaret finally spoke after several minutes had passed.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

The two girls remained silent for some time. Margaret thought about what she had found in her file. She never realized her dad had such intuition to plan for her sneaking in and looking through his papers. He seemed like such a simple man to her, not like a man who could dream up a story like this. It eased her conscience to know that he had foreseen that she might snoop around, and took precautions against it. She wondered how she would face him tomorrow, knowing that she had looked through something forbidden, and whether he would know.

As Margaret shifted through her thoughts, strange things she remembered came back to her. Amy’s remark of how she didn’t look like her siblings bothered her. Amy was right, Margaret looked nothing like her brother and sister, yet they both looked just like her parents.

Margaret’s older sister and she were completely opposite. Helen was smaller and quite petite, her hair much darker than Margaret’s, which was almost blond. Margaret was well built, something her sister had always envied. It didn’t bother her that she looked different from the rest of her family, at least, not until now.

As the youngest child, Margaret always felt like an outsider in the family. Now all her feelings of not belonging the way she thought she should seemed vindicated. What if the papers weren’t false? They looked like legitimate documents, except for the letter, and her dad wasn’t the type of guy to do such a thing. Why would he even bother making up a fake document? It just didn’t feel right to her.

“Margaret, thank you,” Amy spoke, disturbing her friend’s wandering thoughts.

“For what?” questioned Margaret.

“For finding the name of my father.”

“Oh,” spoke Margaret, returning her thoughts to the present. “Right, you’re welcome. What are friends for?”

“That’s a lot to ask of any friend,” uttered Amy sincerely.

Margaret looked over at her friend lying in the sleeping bag next to her. From the moonlight coming through the window, Margaret saw that Amy had her eyes closed. A small

tear streamed down Amy's cheek as she lay there. She suddenly felt so ashamed for thinking of herself when her friend needed some emotional support right now. This was a big moment for Amy, an answer to a question which always haunted her.

Margaret smiled, knowing that their quest had filled a void which always troubled her friend. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing that the two of them had done this evening. Amy had a legitimate reason to want to know who her father was. Margaret forgot about her own file and allowed her thoughts to wander to other times. It only took a moment for a tear to trickle down her own cheek.

Margaret tried to imagine how it was for Amy's mother raising her all alone. She knew that many kids raised in a single parent family were troubled, and had many problems. Amy had turned out really well, and her success centered around her mother's determination and never ending support. Margaret couldn't comprehend that this woman came here alone with a new baby. Amy's mother was such a neat lady, and Margaret wondered what had happened to bring the woman to the small town of Deer Hollow.

The sun shone brightly on the small practice field in Harrison during the gentle autumn afternoon. The school year had just begun for the class of 1975, and the football team showed promise for the new season which had started two weekends earlier. Small towns like Harrison took pride in the football season. The entire community rallied to support the local team as they defended their record and hoped for a state championship.

Heather Alexander walked up to where her best friend, Laura Donovan, sat waiting on the bleachers. Laura had her head buried in her history book, paying little attention to her surroundings. Several football players were already on the field warming up. The rest of the team would join them momentarily for pre-practice exercises. Heather couldn't see Todd's number among any of the jerseys. She knew he would arrive soon.

"Hi Laura, what are you doing homework for?" Heather asked, surveying the field.

"I'm just trying to get a jump on things. I have a lot of homework to do tonight," Laura answered. She was a small girl with honey blond hair. Her warm blue eye's glistened under the bright afternoon sun. The day made studying hard, but she had little time for the inconveniences of the weather. She ignored it, blocking out the playful urge that accompanied such an afternoon. Her focus remained on the book, ignoring the warm rays of light which tempted the lazy side of her personality.

Except for a few stragglers, the two girls sat alone on the bleachers. Some other students had scattered around the field, enjoying the afternoon and watching the practice, but Laura and Heather had this section of the stands to themselves. That made sense, the bleachers got much

warmer than the cool grass surrounding the field, but comfort would only impair her ability to refrain from relaxation.

“You have all night to do your homework. There's more important things before you right now. Look at all those nice bodies wrapped in skin tight football uniforms.” Heather raised her voice so the players out on the field could hear her. “Nice form boys, put a little more hustle into it.”

Laura buried her face in her lap from embarrassment. She expected something like this from her friend, but not so soon. Laura didn't share in her friend's forwardness, and generally felt nervous around guys. Heather just laughed at her bashful companion. She knew her friend well enough to predict the reaction she would receive from Laura.

The group of players paid little attention to Heather's teasing. They knew her well and were busy getting prepared for practice. The grass on the field had hardened and thinned since summer, and the ground no longer provided a soft cushion during falls. They would need to remain alert in order to avoid injuries.

From the girls' vantage point, the field had taken on a hint of yellow throughout its usual deep green hue. The smell of falling leaves and dried grass filled the air with the aroma of autumn. It was a smell of early season football, and a smell of high school days of glory. For students in their senior year, it was the perfect smell, and the perfect beginning to a great and final year of school.

Laura removed the jacket she wore. The winds had shifted and the gusts died down. It felt cool when she first walked out, but the weather had changed suddenly. The warmth of the sun drove the temperature up and eliminated the need for the parka.

“Come on, Laura, what are you afraid of, they don't bite,” coaxed Heather. “Well, at least, not unless you ask them to. I see Jeremy Harris is out there. You know you want to see what he's hiding beneath his uniform. I'll go tell him to meet you behind the bleachers after practice, wait here.”

Laura reached out and grabbed Heather before she could leave. Her face looked frozen with panic. She had known Heather long enough to know she would do anything to embarrass someone, and Laura didn't trust her not to take the teasing to far.

“Heather! Stop it, you're embarrassing me. I'm not going to play ‘you show me yours, I'll show you mine’ with Jeremy Harris under the bleachers.”

“You're first time has to be somewhere. You don't want to do it in a car, and you don't want to do it under the bleachers. Where do you want to lose your virginity, in your parent's house?”

“Even that would be more romantic than any of the places you choose to do it,” answered Laura. “I want my first time to be special, and not with the first guy you point out on the football field.”

“You've wanted to go out with Jeremy Harris ever since you were in Junior High. You check him out every day. If you would just go and talk to him, you'd have him naked and begging for you in a week.”

“Even if I did want Jeremy Harris, I wouldn't want him undressed in a week. I would want him to respect me. I would still want to respect myself,” answered Laura. “There would have to be a pretty good reason for me to jump in the sack with a guy I've never had a conversation with. I want a guy to get to know me, not my body.”

Laura had grown up in a confusing time period, hitting her teens during the summer of love. It was hard living in a conservative home in 1975 while the sexual revolution still reigned strong. There were pressures everywhere, even from her best friend. She knew that she was the exception, rather than the rule, but she had maintained her innocence through it all.

“You worry too much about how you're going to feel afterwards,” criticized Heather. “Live for the present, not the future, it'll make life a lot more enjoyable. I've slept with a dozen guys whom I hadn't known more than a week and it's never affected my conscience. Todd and I have been doing it for more than three months. I still have the same self-respect that I had when I was twelve years old. Purity and virginity are just a state of mind, sex is living.”

Laura set down the book she held. She gave her friend a warm smile and placed the book back inside her bag, realizing she wouldn't get much more reading done. They were two different people, which kept their conversations interesting, but they were also good friends. Laura knew that Heather didn't mean anything by her remarks. She stood up and threw her long hair over her shoulders and out of her eyes.

The skirt she wore just covered her knees, but below that, her well tanned and strong legs were bare. A thin waistline and generous curves accented her petite form. Her flawless complexion reflected the sun's bright rays, giving her a young glow.

Heather stood taller than Laura by several inches. The tight jeans she wore made it obvious that she was proud of the impressive figure she worked so hard to maintain. The two girls moved down the bleachers for a closer look at the field. Heather led the way with her usual excited nature. Laura laughed at her careless and free spirited friend.

“Heather, wait up,” urged Laura. “What's your rush. They aren't going anywhere.”

“I just want to be close enough to see Todd. He looks so cute in his little uniform. It's such a turn on. I make him wear it sometimes while we're doing it. I love the smell of sweat mixed with mud.”

“I’ll never look at him on the field the same way again,” uttered Laura in disgust. “He hates it when you watch him, it makes him nervous. Why do you have to tease him so much? If you embarrass him all the time, you’ll crush his confidence.”

“It’s all part of the game, Laura,” explained Heather as she sat down on the bleachers to wait. “One of these days, when you start doing it with a guy, you’ll learn how to make him nervous. When he’s nervous, you’re in control.”

“Why do you want to be in control?”

“Another fundamental part of the game,” Heather replied. “You see, Laura, that’s what it all is, just a game. If you learn how to play it right, you can’t lose. It’s not hard to beat a guy at the game, we have the one thing they want, and we have some self-control. We are the dominators of the game, they’re defenseless against us.”

“You make it sound so uninviting,” remarked Laura. “A relationship should be a sharing experience, not a fight for control.”

“You’re just old fashioned. Men don’t come and sweep you away on horseback anymore. If you don’t exercise some strength in the relationship, you’ll just get walked on. It isn’t about romance anymore, just foreplay.”

“I miss the days of chivalry,” mumbled Laura, “when there was substance and romance. What ever happened to sending flowers and remaining faithful to your partner. I miss the comfort of long term relationships and men who would fight for your honor.”

“You read to much of those dreamy ancient history books. What about the black plague and bathing in dirty water. Think about all those rats, it takes the romance right out of the days of chivalry. You’re living in an age of sexual freedom. If you keep your jeans zipped up this tight all your life, it’s just gonna pass you by.”

“I won’t die if it all passes me by. Someday I’ll meet somebody who still knows the meaning of romance, somebody who loves poetry and long walks along the beach.”

“You live in Iowa,” remarked Heather. “There aren’t any beaches in Iowa, just miles and miles of corn. Long walks through the cornfield aren’t extremely romantic. Of course, rolling around in the hayloft can be a lot of fun.”

Laura stood up and grabbed her friend’s hand. She pulled Heather to her feet and began dragging her up the aisle towards the practice field.

“Come on Heather,” pleaded Laura. “We need to practice our drills. These guys aren’t the only people who have to perform in front of the crowd Friday night.”

Heather stared out at the well-lit football field. Her stomach rolled inside her as butterflies seemed to beat their wings against her ribs. She reached down and adjusted her

bloomers, which had ridden up on her. The young cheerleader could hardly wait for the game to begin. The crowd was cheering this year's senior class from behind her.

Heather had imagined this moment all her life. Her senior year seemed so far away until now. Yet here it was, staring her in the face. Her first seventeen years flashed before her as the crowd chanted "seventy-five," cheering the seniors.

"This is so great. It feels like a dream," screamed Heather over the noise of the crowd as she turned around to look up at the stands.

"I know," agreed Laura, who stood next to her with her pompoms at her side. "It seems so unreal to think this is our own homecoming game. I thought this day would never come."

Laura and Heather stood staring up at the huge crowd gathered for the game. In the dark night, the bright lights illuminated the field with a fluorescent mist and excitement flooded the air as they looked up at what seemed like the entire county surrounding the small high school field. The bitter chill of the mid-autumn night and the smell of cheap food from the snack bar was the only reminder that everything was real.

The group of girls had little protection from the elements in the small outfits that they wore. They looked almost identical in appearance, with their hair drawn up in French braids so it wouldn't get in the way of their cheering. The blue and white uniforms they wore had a large "H" printed on the front, and they executed their drills with precision.

Heather threw up her pompoms and kicked one leg up into the air, regretting the action as she reached down a second time to adjust her bloomers. She stood next to Laura in the formation. Heather led the cheers as head cheerleader. She moved closer to Laura so she could scream more secretly over the rumble of the crowd.

"I have a special night planned with Todd after the game," began Heather enthusiastically.

"Oh yeah, are you doing something romantic?" questioned Laura.

"Of course," exclaimed Heather. "I'm having sex with the hero of tonight's game. I borrowed the keys to my grandma's house. She's out of town for the weekend. My parents are supposed to check the house tomorrow. By then we will have christened every room in the house."

"That's terrible, Heather. How can you do it in your grandmother's house. That would give me the creeps," answered Laura in surprise.

"It's the excitement of doing it in a dangerous place where you know you shouldn't that makes it so great. If you only knew the places where Todd and I have done it. It really gets the guy excited. Someday you'll know what I'm talking about."

"I don't know," replied Laura unenthusiastically. "My grandma's house smells like mothballs and menthol. I can't imagine that exciting anybody."

“I told Todd to make a touchdown for me. I added a special incentive to the evening if he could do it,” boasted Heather.

“What more can you give him? He already knows every nook and cranny on your body by heart. He could find his way blindfolded!”

“Laura, you have a lot to learn.”

The marching band played the school song and the crowd stood up to sing the chorus. The two girls watched anxiously minutes later as the Star Spangled Banner began to play. The opposing team stood on the sidelines across the field from the bleachers. Laura could see some of the players out of the corner of her eye.

“You know, Laura, you could sneak off with one of Jefferson's players tonight and you'd never see him again. It would be the perfect opportunity to experience all the pleasure you're so afraid to unlock,” suggested Heather as the anthem played on.

“I'm not dropping my pants for anyone on Jefferson's football team,” Heather whispered as the crowd settled down with respect. “I'm not dropping my pants for anyone at all. When I do drop my pants will be after I'm married and alone with my husband. You can bet every ounce of indecency in your body that I'm not going to drop my pants tonight.” Laura spoke firmly. She had grown accustomed to the constant pressure by her best friend and had learned to enjoy the meaningless teasing. She had never allowed it to bother her.

“That's what you say now,” replied Heather. “The night is far from over, my friend.”

Heather picked up the banner which lay rolled up on the ground behind the cheerleader's bench. She led the group of girls out on the field and they split up and opened it facing the hometown crowd. Harrison's football team still hadn't entered the field. They sat just beyond their end zone in a silent prayer for a few minutes before they stood up to face the field.

The coach screamed out a rally call and Harrison High School's football team ran onto the field as the crowd roared to life. Todd was the fastest on the team and the first to break through the banner. Heather winked at him as he ran by her.

Todd turned his head to wink back at her and accidentally tripped over his feet. He rolled into a somersault and came to his feet with the grace of a dancer. The act looked as if he had planned to do it, but Heather could see the embarrassment on his face as he turned to look at her again. He smiled and winked back at her as he led the team to the bench in front of the crowd.

Harrison lost the toss moments later, and the game started with Harrison kicking off to Jefferson. The community cheered their hometown team through the whole game. It was a game of strong defenses. There were few touchdowns made and neither of the teams moved the ball significantly.

The score seemed to go from one side to the other. The teams scored most of their points on field goals, each matching the other's. The game seemed to last forever for the group of girls

who led the crowd with their cheering. As the game carried on, Laura and Heather grew more anxious for it to come to a close. The excitement of the entire night seemed to surround them wherever they looked.

The final seconds soon came to a close. Heather stood close to Laura to conserve their body heat. Heather could hardly stand up, their legs were shaking so badly from the excitement. She knew that this was the last play of the game. Their opponents needed to get in the end zone to win the game, but they were over fifty yards back, and Harrison's defense was the best in their division.

The quarterback snapped the ball and the receivers ran out for the long pass. There were three receivers running downfield and Harrison exercised the man to man defense. The quarterback picked out the farthest receiver and threw the ball moments before getting hit by two members of Harrison's defensive line.

The stands roared with anxiety as the crowd of people watched the ball soar through the air towards the two players running towards the end zone. Heather recognized Todd's number on the blue and white jersey. He was all that stood between the ball and number 87 from the opposing team.

The two athletes jumped into the air simultaneously as the ball began its descent towards them. A clashing struggle took place as the ball fell into the hands of the two young men. As the boys' feet returned to the ground, Todd came up empty handed, but had caught his balance and still stood between number 87 and a touchdown.

Todd's adversary held onto the ball, but faltered as he tried to regain control of his feet. His hand hit the ground and with all the strength he could muster, he forced himself back to his feet and directly at Todd. He tightened his grasp on the ball and brought his head down as he drove right into Todd's chest. The force of his strike threw Todd off his feet and landed Todd right on his back.

The buzzer sounding the end of the game went off just as number 87 crossed the goal line with the ball held high in the air. The arms of the nearest official flew up and indicated the touchdown to the crowd of devastated supporters.

Heather watched the opposite side of the field as the players celebrated their victory. The mood behind her in the stands was far from triumphant. It seemed as if the entire town had taken a moment to absorb what they had witnessed. The only sound came from the cheering across the field. The crowd slowly picked up their belongings and began out of the bleachers.

Heather glanced over to where Todd sat on his knees pounding his head and hands against the turf. She motioned towards him, but was caught by Laura before she could take a step.

“Give him a minute. There's nothing you can do for him right now,” Laura beckoned to Heather.

“I've got to go. He needs me right now.”

“No, it will just make matters worse. Give him a few minutes to himself. You'll destroy his ego if his girlfriend has to come to his rescue.”

Laura felt bad, not for losing the game, but for Todd. She knew he wouldn't take this well at all. The football coach walked over to where Todd sat pounding the ground. He reached out a hand and helped his young player to his feet. Laura watched as the coach consoled and spoke with Todd.

“Damn, this is gonna ruin the whole evening,” muttered Heather from behind her.

Laura walked over to an empty seat in the bleachers and yelled at Heather to join her. Heather walked over hastily and sat beside her good friend. They watched the expressions of the crowd as they left the bleachers. Looks of devastation and sadness covered the fans' faces.

After several minutes, Heather and Laura picked up their pompoms and walked closer to the parking lot. Harrison's football team listened to a short speech by the coach before they left the field. The usual sportsmanlike shaking of hands occurred as the teams passed by one another, but sportsmanship wasn't on the minds of Harrison's players. Laura and Heather waited on the bleachers near Todd's truck for him to come to the parking lot.

Before long, Heather spotted Todd walking up with his helmet in his hand. His head hung low and his spirits were obviously down. Laura held Heather's arm tightly, trying to hold her back.

“I can't stand seeing him in such pain,” pleaded Heather to her close friend. “I have to go talk to him. He needs to know I'm here for him.”

“I wouldn't do it if I were you,” advised Laura. “Wait for him to come to you. He needs his space right now.”

Heather ignored the advice of her close friend. She walked quickly across the parking lot towards Todd. She saw the rage in his face as she came closer to his truck. As she reached out and touched his arm he twisted violently away from her grasp. The movement caught Heather by surprise as she backed away from him.

“Don't touch me right now,” Todd lashed out verbally at the heartbroken young girl before him.

“What's your problem?” she asked with a quiet tremble. His rough reaction to her attempt to comfort him had caught several eyes from the crowd walking to their cars.

“We just lost the damn homecoming game, what do you think my problem is?” he lashed back in a loud voice, not caring who heard him. Heather sensed his pain. She leaned over closer to his ear and began to whisper.

“Get in the truck. Let's take a ride. I bet I can find a way to take your mind off it,” she spoke in a soft and soothing voice.

“Is that your answer to everything? Do you think that's really gonna solve everything,” Todd yelled, obviously upset. Several people slowed their pace as they walked by the feuding couple. Heather felt a wave of anger come over her.

“Go to Hell,” she whispered as she turned and ran back towards her lone companion. Todd climbed inside his truck and started the engine with a roar. The old Ford pickup launched a cloud of dust as he floored the gas and took off out the parking lot.

Heather returned to the stands where Laura sat waiting for her. Laura smiled an understanding grin at her good friend. She could see by the look on Heather's face that Todd had upset her. She tried to think of something to say, but knew there were no words for moments like this.

“Doesn't look like he's in a very good mood,” Laura uttered to break the tension.

“He doesn't have to take it out on me. I'm not the one who knocked him on his ass out there,” Heather exclaimed in an irritated tone.

“Give him some time, he'll come around. You just need to try to understand what he's feeling right now.”

“To hell with him. I don't need to be treated that way. I've always done everything I could to understand him. I don't care if I never see him again. Let him find someone else to treat like garbage.”

Laura just sat there, hoping time would soothe the fresh wounds her friend had received. She didn't want to say anything else. Sometimes the best advice a friend could give, was no advice at all. The stands were now almost empty besides the two girls and a few stragglers who still sat in dismay. The opposing team walked across the green turf towards the locker rooms. They walked directly past the two girls as they walked up the bleachers from the field.

As Heather looked up from her seat, the inscription on a jersey caught her eye. The number 87 seemed to jump out at her. Her rage towards her boyfriend shifted as she looked up at the face of the spoiler.

The soft eyes of the player caught Heather off guard. He smiled a warm smile that made her forget for a brief moment everything that had just occurred. Heather couldn't bring herself to smile back at him, but in the seconds that followed, she suddenly found herself turning to watch him as he walked beyond her.

“I’ll show him,” proclaimed Heather, “I can find plenty of guys who would appreciate me.”

“No Heather, it’s not worth it,” pleaded Laura as her friend started to stand up.

“The hell it isn’t,” she answered back as she followed the team towards the locker room.

Laura watched from a distance as Heather approached the player. She couldn’t believe the sight before her. Heather talked to the player for several minutes before he joined the rest of his team in the locker room. The way Heather moved, Laura could tell that her mood had changed. She came running back towards her friend who remained in the stands. Laura saw the excited smile on her face before Heather could utter a word.

“Look’s like grandma’s house is gonna get christened after all.”

“You don’t really mean to tell me that you’re gonna go off with a guy you’ve never met before, do you?” asked Laura.

“Laura, what’s your problem? This is what I do when a guy treats me like trash. I find someone else.”

“Todd needs some time right now, that’s all,” explained Laura. “Don’t do this now. I promise you, you’ll live to regret it.”

“I can live with myself.”

Chapter Three

Laura sat on her back porch looking up at the stars. Less than an hour had passed since the game's fateful ending, which affected everything around her except the weather, and it was a beautiful night outside. Away from the commotion of the game and the frustration in the town, the evening was perfect. She realized that miles away, for those who had never even heard of Harrison high school, it was just an ordinary Friday night. Here, however, the mood around town was somber and gloomy.

Laura didn't feel crushed by the events that took place this evening. Presently, her best friend enjoyed herself with the football hero of the homecoming game, just as she had predicted before the game. Somewhere out there, Todd bore the weight of the game on his shoulders, alone. She felt bad for Todd.

Laura came home from the game and wrote in her journal. The night had turned out nothing like she expected, but she still enjoyed putting her thoughts down on paper. She came outside to clear her mind, and the air outside was ideal for such a task. Now, everything seemed so simple to her.

Laura laughed to herself at the foolishness of the people in her hometown. The lives of the people here had so little meaning. She desperately wanted to escape from it all and get away. She had trouble keeping track of time, and the days seemed to melt together. She could predict the entire events of each day as it unfolded before her, and it felt as if nothing spontaneous ever happened to her. Maybe that's why she liked Heather so much. Heather filled her in on everything, and perhaps through witnessing Heather's life unfold, she managed to satisfy her rebellious interests. Laura experienced another life through her friendship with Heather, and often wished she could experience such carelessness.

In some ways, she did indeed envy Heather. Laura had other hopes to keep her focus as well. Her dreams of college and the wonders she would experience there clouded her head with their soft illusions. This was where she hid from the world, in her fantasies of the future.

"Hi Laura, have you seen Heather lately?" asked a voice from behind her. Laura jumped in surprise at the sound, her solitude disturbed by the sudden intrusion. Standing several feet away from her was the dark figure of a young man. She recognized the tall, well-built individual at once.

"You scared me to death," Laura whispered over to him.

"I'm sorry," Todd apologized. "I just didn't want to disturb your parents. Is Heather around? I feel just awful."

"Oh, I'm sure she feels the same way right now," Laura proclaimed in a sarcastic tone.

"What do you mean by that?"

“Look, Todd, Heather’s my best friend. I don’t think I should get involved in your problems. I think you’re a nice guy, and you probably deserve to know what’s going on, but I’m not gonna be the one to tell you about it. You and Heather should work this out on your own.”

“She’s out with someone else, isn’t she?” he asked as he walked over beside Laura.

“She’s my best friend, Todd. You really upset her when you made a scene in front of everybody like that.”

Todd sat down next to Laura on the stairs of the porch. He had changed his clothes and washed up. His blue and white jacket glistened brightly in the moonlight. His usual rough appearance had changed with a clean shave. Laura had never sat so close to him before.

Laura didn’t really know Todd that well. Most of what she knew, she had heard from Heather, some of it graphically detailed. She probably knew more about him than she wanted, or than he wanted her to know. She kept a distance between herself and Heather’s boyfriends. Most didn’t last very long. His presence made her uncomfortable, and her conscience made her angry, at Heather. This was precisely the reason she stayed out of the relationships Heather carried on. Laura didn’t like explaining to heartbroken guys why Heather didn’t want them around anymore. He was a name, more than a person to her, and she didn’t know for sure why he had even come here. Todd surely didn’t know her well enough to sneak into her backyard and startle her like this.

“She thinks sex is the answer to all the world’s problems,” uttered Todd, understandably agitated. “I hate how she does that. A relationship should be more than just physical satisfaction. I wish she could just listen to me once in a while. You know what I mean. She’s a wonderful girl, but we never get to talk. Everywhere we go she wants to do it. There isn’t any substance or romance.”

“I’m surprised, Todd. I didn’t peg you to be looking for any kind of meaning in your affairs. I figured your relationship was built on the mutual need for one thing.”

“No, most guys are looking for sex. I admit in the beginning that was my main interest. She was the first girl I ever did it with, but once we got beyond that, I wanted something more. I don’t feel any warmth when we have sex, it isn’t making love.”

“I don’t think I want to know this much about your relationship with Heather,” spoke Laura, disgusted with his openness. It took a second before something inside her snapped. “How can you tell everybody about Heather’s and your personal life. It’s no wonder she gets upset with you if you can’t keep it to yourself. Some things should be kept sacred.”

“I don’t tell everyone. In fact, I’ve never told anybody. I have too much respect for her, but I know she tells you everything, she told me so. I’m not telling you anything you won’t hear anyway. So I’m no worse than she is.”

Laura sat quietly for a moment, her face bright red. Heather did tell her everything, but she didn't think that the guys suspected. Heather's relationships were merely stories to Laura, almost unreal. She didn't even consider the seriousness of what she heard. She felt ashamed that Todd knew what Heather had told her, like he caught her doing something she shouldn't, and it put her on the spot. His honesty confused her. She had never had such an uncandid conversation with a guy. The embarrassment of the conversation made her extremely uncomfortable.

"Why are you blushing," asked Todd. "Heather never blushes when she talks about it. She's so open about everything."

"I'm not Heather, now am I?" Laura lashed out. Heather and she were good friends, but she didn't like the comparison. "Just because we're friends, doesn't mean we have the same moral fibers. I'm not the same kind of girl as Heather. I don't do the things she does."

"You mean that you and Heather are best friends, and you don't do it?"

"Surprised!? You don't even know me. What makes you think that just because you're sleeping with my best friend, you know the first thing about me?"

"I'm sorry," answered Todd after a moment of silence. "I just assumed that since you and Heather were such good friends, you were probably alike. I shouldn't be so quick to judge. Will you accept my apology?"

Laura just sat there, still in shock from his revelations. He seemed just the opposite of what she expected. Laura didn't know very many guys, and she judged them more on actions. His honesty confounded the feelings of guilt within her. She felt bad for labeling him without once holding a conversation with him. Honesty didn't make itself apparent in most of the guys she had gone out with, and this new insight gave her dreams more hope. There were still some good guys out there.

"Yes," Laura finally answered. "I guess I should apologize too. I had you pegged as just another guy. All the guys around here are the same. I haven't dated anyone in months because I kept having to fight them off at the end of the night. I was beginning to get tired of walking home after I ended my dates. I hope that when I do decide to make love to someone, it means as much to him as it does to me."

Laura instantly went beet red when she realized what she had just said. She couldn't believe that such a personal thought just slipped out of her mouth. She had little time to regret her words before Todd replied.

"So that's why you quit dating. Some of the guys thought you might be..." There was a hesitation in Todd's voice. Laura could sense that he was thinking twice about finishing the remark.

"The guys thought I might be what?" she questioned.

“Well, they thought maybe you liked girls more than guys. There’s been talk that several girls at school are...”

“That is so typical,” Laura growled. The red color of her face changed from the softness of embarrassment to the deepness of anger. “A guy thinks that just because you’re not putting out, you like girls or something.”

“I never thought that,” Todd defended himself. He felt bad for speaking without thinking first, and wanted to ease her anger. “You know how rumors start sometimes. Don’t be upset, it’s just that you quit dating all together. You’re a really sweet girl, and you have standards. There’s a lot of guys out there who are kind of old fashioned, and would consider you the light at the end of the tunnel. You can’t just drop out of the social game completely. You might think you’re protecting yourself from some over-sexed lunatic, but you might be passing up the chance to meet the right guy for you. You know, if I would have met you six months ago, I don’t think I would be dating Heather right now,” he smiled.

“No,” answered Laura angrily. “You think you would be having your way with me instead, right?”

“I never said that,” Todd contested “Why do you think that’s all I’m interested in. I would give up all the sex just to have some substance between Heather and I right now. You’re so quick to stereotype all men into one class. Who placed the big chip on your shoulders. I’m the one who’s being cheated on right now, not Heather.”

Todd was right. She had treated him harshly, and taken her frustrations out on an undeserving target. She felt sorry for falsely accusing him, and wanted to clear the air.

“I’m sorry, Todd. I just can’t wait to get away from this place. It gets worse every day. I get so tired with all the routine and boring qualities this town has that I don’t want to see the few good things that are here.”

“Why are you so determined to leave? I love this town. I would hate living in a big city. We used to live in a city when I was little. I hated it there.”

“What is there to hate about the city? There’s always something to do or see.”

“There are good things about it too,” replied Todd. “I mean, come Monday, I’m gonna wish nobody knew who I was. The whole town was there to watch me lose the game tonight, but I like walking down the street and having people know my name. Nobody cares about you in a big city. A person’s just another face that you’ll never see again.”

“But there’s nothing to do here. It’s so pathetic. I want to experience life. Everything here is so bleak and dead.”

“You just need to learn how to create your own excitement,” suggested Todd. “The city sounds glamorous, but there’s only so many things you can do. Before you can have fun

anywhere, you must first know how to have fun. You don't need a city for excitement. Loosen up a little bit and enjoy what's here and now. You can't live your life for the future."

"You mean it doesn't bother you that people are going to be cold and harsh towards you, probably for the next few weeks, just for something that was beyond your control."

"It upset me at first," confessed Todd. "I admit it bothered me, but I know that in time they'll remember all the touchdowns I made and the good plays I completed. Then they'll forget. Right now I just want to get on with things."

The teenagers sat quietly staring at the night sky. Laura wore a sweater over her cheerleading outfit and wrapped herself up in a warm blanket. Her thoughts became tangled up in what Todd had just revealed to her. She felt betrayed, knowing what the guys in her hometown thought about her. For a moment, she forgot he was even there. She felt so alone. The two remained in silence until Todd finally spoke up.

"So who's she with?"

"I don't feel right telling you this," Laura spoke with reservation. "She's still my best friend."

"She's my girlfriend," Todd argued. "I think I have the right to know who she's with. I deserve to know."

"I don't really think you want to know," Laura proclaimed.

"Please, Laura," he pleaded. "I have to know."

Laura sat quietly for a long time while struggling with her conscience. She knew that he would not take it very well. Finally, she looked at him and smiled a heart felt smile. She spoke with hesitation.

"She's with one of Jefferson's football players."

Laura watched as all the color drifted from Todd's face, leaving only a deathly white. He brought his hands to his face and ran his fingers through his hair as he clasped them behind his head. He sat motionlessly for some time while staring at his feet.

"That really hurts," he finally responded. "Do you think she's sleeping with him? I mean she's your best friend. You know her a lot better than I do."

"She's just upset, Todd," Laura reassured him. "I'm sure she wouldn't go through with it. Your relationship means more to her than that."

"Who are we kidding. I've only known her for a short time, but I would bet my life that she's rolling in the sheets with him right now. They've probably already done it twice. I knew this would happen eventually."

"You're right," Laura giggled at the remark, still trying to act respectful. Todd was no fool, he could think for himself. You didn't need to know Heather very long to understand that

she often strayed. "I'm afraid she doesn't need much of an excuse to cheat on one of her boyfriends. I'm really sorry, Todd, you don't deserve this."

"I thought it would be different this time," Todd began, still staring at the ground. "She told me she loved me. She and I promised we would never even date another person without telling the other first. What do I have to do to get a girl who will remain faithful?"

Todd looked up at Laura. She could see his deep blue eyes in the moonlight. They glistened brightly from the stream of tears which had formed. It angered her that Heather could do such a thing, and she wished Heather were here now, to see the consequences of her actions. A feeling of pity for the broken hero came over her. Todd deserved better, and in a way she wished she had met him before Heather did.

"It's sort of cold out here," Laura spoke. "I've got a lot of blanket here that I'm not using. Feel free to warm up a little, I don't mind sharing."

Laura opened her arm with the blanket to Todd. He glanced over, as if she had uttered the unthinkable, but a soft smile soon appeared over his face. He scooted over a little bit and leaned up against her, sharing in her warmth. Laura sensed that he held back the tears. Sitting next to her, he didn't seem as large as when he was on the playing field.

"Some guy I am," Todd declared. "I'm lying here on the shoulder of my girlfriend's best friend. I might as well just break out and cry so that you can have absolutely no respect for me."

"I wouldn't lose respect for you if you cried. I wouldn't mind crying a little bit myself. I mean, half the school thinks I'm a lesbian. I bet the girls are afraid to shower in the locker room with me. All my life I've tried to maintain some respect and now I find everyone thinks I'm queer. Sometimes I just wish I could escape this dreary pit right now."

The sudden shattering of her own self image burned like a fire in her stomach. She had always thought that her reservations with boys would force them to respect her self worth, instead it had betrayed that, and brought about a false conclusion. She had never felt so alone before. Why had Heather never mentioned that the other students thought she liked girls? Surely she knew. Laura felt no guilt for sharing the evening with Todd. They shared more than just the passing time, they shared a common sorrow, and a feeling of self pity. Laura couldn't predict the revelations just made to her, and it wasn't the sort of spontaneity that yearned within her heart. For a moment, she wished Todd had never come here tonight, bringing a reality she didn't want to accept. At the same time, she welcomed a friend. His presence brought about a new desire, to prove her burden of truth.

"I wouldn't mind running away myself right now. We all have to escape from ourselves now and then."

"You're a really nice guy, Todd," Laura assured him. "I'm glad Heather isn't here right now. I kind of enjoy your company."

Todd looked over at the beautiful girl next to him. He smiled as he reached up to touch her soft cheek. Why couldn't he share moments like this with Heather? He really didn't care at this point. He began to utter something, but stopped before he could as Laura placed her finger over his lips.

"Don't say anything," she uttered softly as she leaned forward and touched his lips with her own. The softness of her kiss made his troubles subside as he relaxed and enjoyed the warm sensation that traveled through him. He dropped his arm from her cheek and placed it on the small of her back as he drew her nearer to him. Laura placed her hand on his chest and he could feel her trembling fingers.

"You are so beautiful in the moonlight," Todd spoke softly as he opened his eyes to look into hers. He hesitated as a cold feeling of guilt overcame him. "Maybe I should go, I didn't come here with this in mind. I don't want to destroy your image of me."

"No, this is right, I can feel it." Honesty had never come so easily to Laura. This was what she searched for, the spontaneity that she dreamed about. She took his advice seriously. It was time she lived her life for the present, and guilt wouldn't hold her back now. "Don't leave right now, I feel comfortable in your arms. I really need to be held right now. I've needed this for some time, to make this town more bearable. You know you need it too. Let's forget who we are, and where we are."

Todd reached forward and gently kissed her neck. His lips tenderly caressed her soft skin. His movement seemed to parallel her desires, as if he knew what she enjoyed. Could it feel any better? She didn't even know what she enjoyed, but this certainly fit the expectations. She found his touch stirring pleasures she had never known. Laura's thoughts drifted aimlessly into oblivion as she relaxed in his arms. She felt his slow breathing pattern as the exhaled air from his lungs warmed her neck and face.

Todd's arms were large and solid. Laura felt them as she advanced her touch to place her arms around him. Drawing him closer still, Laura utilized his body heat to warm her own. The temperature of her own body rose swiftly as years of passion released itself from her inner self. In the moment of satisfaction, she decided that she enjoyed escaping the complexities of her existence, and she didn't want to turn back.

Todd removed his jacket while never allowing his lips to leave the soft skin of her neck. Laura continued to pull Todd closer to her, so that his chest pressed tightly against hers, and she felt the racing of his heart. She slowly moved her hands down his back, all the while bringing him nearer and nearer to her, wanting him closer still.

Laura swung her head around and met his lips with her own. Todd's full lips were soft and moist, his breath smelled of warm cinnamon. She brought her hand up and firmly held the

back of his head. She opened her mouth wider to kiss him. The sudden movement caused the blanket to fall from her shoulders, exposing what she wore.

Todd knew that she would soon grow cold in the chilly evening air. The sweater she placed over her outfit would keep her upper body toasty, but the cheerleading skirt and bloomers she had on beneath it would not do much on this autumn eve.

“Here,” Todd uttered. “Put the blanket over your legs so you can keep warm. It’s too cold out here for your cheerleading outfit.”

“Actually,” Laura whispered softly. “I’m burning up out here.”

Laura forced Todd to lean back against the steps. She climbed up and grabbed the blanket from the porch beside her. Laura sat down over him and pulled the blanket over her shoulders. She brought the blanket around his back and squeeze him tightly while she slowly nibbled on one of his ears. In the back of her mind, a brutal struggle occurred. An ever triumphant moral right had suddenly tasted defeat from the restlessly aggressive sprite which had sprung out at this unexpected event. This was something she might regret later, but the whole thing had a fresh appeal. Laura enjoyed the new feelings she experienced. This was a new taste that satisfied a starved appetite, and she needed something fresh to fulfill her cravings.

“You smell great,” Laura whispered in his ear. “I could do this all night, if you’d like to?”

“What about your parents,” asked Todd. He suddenly felt extremely nervous, and usually didn’t like abrupt introductions to angry fathers. He did not wish for an unexpected confrontation. “I don’t want to startle them.”

“They think I’m out here alone,” Laura assured him, she seemed irritated at his lack of concentration. “I come out here all the time, and they never come out and check on me. We’re all alone.”

“But they’ll hear us.”

“No they won’t. Trust me, they’ll never know.”

Laura reached down and undid the buttons on his shirt. Her lips never left his as she carefully pushed the shirt out of her way to expose his bare chest. She grabbed one of his hands which rested in the small of her back and guided his fingers up and under her sweater. He caressed her warm skin softly, exploring her features.

Todd’s hands roamed freely about the soft skin hidden beneath the warm sweater. Her kisses grew more feverish, and she failed to realize where her desires took her, or maybe, failed to care anymore. Her skin slowly grew rough with thousands of small bumps, not caused by the cool temperature outside, more a result of some inner excitement. She could tell that he felt the same, and their carelessness pushed them further towards an unescapable goal. She felt the tension in her hands as she clasped his skin tightly, brushing hard against him.

Laura's hands wandered freely down Todd's chest. She thought she felt a quiver as they moved over his navel, and down towards the zipper on his jeans. She didn't realize how nervous she had become until she fumbled for some time with the simple device. Her hands shook violently, and Todd realized that she could not complete the task. He lifted her up, and laid her softly down upon the grass a few feet away. She dropped effortlessly on her back, with the blanket behind her to insulate her skin from the cold grass, and Todd came to rest over her. Then he rolled over, not wishing to crush her with the weight of his body.

Laura pushed away from Todd momentarily and stood up. He looked up at her deep blue eyes, which looked oddly wild in the moonlight. She stood for a moment staring into his eyes. The stare made him nervous, and a feeling of guilt quickly followed. Anger, rage, and something else, all looked down upon him.

"I'm sorry, Laura," Todd whispered softly. A look of embarrassment came over his face. "I didn't mean for it to go this far."

Laura didn't mutter a word. She just brought her finger to her lips to silence him. She stood for a moment and he feared what would happen next. Todd stared in disbelief as she disrobed and stood over him. For a moment, she wished all the guys she went to school with could catch a glimpse of her, revealing herself to a boy this way, then wondered at the absurdity of the thought. Laura walked back over to lie beside him. She closed her eyes and placed her mouth over his own, tenderly nibbling at his lips.

Things moved quickly and uncontrollably as she pressed forward. She still had the fire in her eyes, but moments later he noticed something else, a look of astonishment. She gasped in pain and he realized her innocence. He slowed her down slightly, allowing some of the pain to subside. The anger in her eyes returned, but she soon closed them to relax. Todd returned his hands to her skin as he leaned back and glanced nervously around.

Laura pulled the blanket around them as she continued in the cool night air. Todd could feel the sharp blades of grass digging into the skin on the back of his neck, but it was far from the most noticeable sensation he now felt. Todd raised his hands to aid her, trying to slow her pace, and she grabbed at the same instant, leaving more of an impression in his skin. Todd fought to hold back the tension, but his excitement soon overpowered him.

Laura never slowed her pace as she moved above him. Todd found himself completely bare of all his clothing as he stared up at the naked body before him. Laura's eyes remained closed and her breathing quickened as she ignored the pain. Her moans slowly rose above the sounds of the night and Todd feared she might alert her parents. He rose up and kissed her as he traded places with her.

Todd studied her face, trying to decipher the rapidly changing expressions. He didn't know if she wished to continue, but she answered the question before it could fully cross his

mind. Moments later he saw a new expression, which lasted for several seconds as she quivered in his arms. Her hand reached up and grabbed the back of his head tightly, the kiss was long and warm. They remained locked in one another's embrace for some time, continuing to enjoy the long, feverish kiss, before the pleasures subsided, unmasking the incredible pain.

"That was the most incredible experience I've ever had," spoke Todd softly into her ear.

"Better than I could ever have imagined," she agreed, but she hadn't anticipated the outcome. In the moments that followed, the pain grew in intensity, and she found herself cringing.

Todd adjusted the blanket to hold in their own warmth, but Laura stopped him, using the slight chill of the night air to cool off. She felt uncomfortable enough without baking in her own sweat. He looked behind him at the house to make sure the commotion had not stirred anyone. There appeared no threat or surprise.

Laura rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. Todd fumbled through his thoughts for something to say, but couldn't find words to express his feelings. Their action would remain with her for several days, and it wouldn't come only in the form of memories. He wished there were something he could do, but only time would relinquish the discomfort. He felt uneasy by the awkwardness of the situation and wondered if he had made a mistake.

"Laura, please don't regret this. You deserved much more for your first time. I didn't know."

"I don't regret anything, Todd. I can't think of a more romantic way to have enjoyed my first time. It was perfect."

"So what do we do now?" Todd asked.

"What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know, Laura."

"Are you going back to Heather?"

"That depends on whether you want to go out sometime or not. I think I would really like to get to know you better."

"I thought you just got to know me?" Laura kidded.

"I don't mean like that. I've never gone out with anybody who I wanted to know like I want to know you right now. You're an intriguing girl, and you have a future planned already. You could get into any college you wanted, and you're practically guaranteed to graduate the head of our class. I want to talk with somebody who can offer stimulating conversation. I would really like to find out what goes on in your head."

He seemed like so much more than a fantasy as he spoke, and right now the only thought in Laura's head was a wish that she had gotten to know him sooner. He seemed as if he knew her already, and appreciated her keen mind. Most people made her feel inferior, because she excelled

in her schoolwork. He acknowledged something she rarely received compliments about. He couldn't say anything more to make her happy, yet an air of guilt still hung over them.

“What will you do about Heather?”

“She just decided what I'm gonna do about her,” Todd answered as he retrieved his clothes. “Let's get dressed and take a walk.”

“Maybe you should talk things over with her before we start walking around town together.”

“It's midnight and our team lost the homecoming game,” explained Todd. “And there isn't any chance of us running into Heather. Nobody's out on the town right now. Most people are probably in bed. Come on, let's go for a walk.”

Laura climbed up slowly and searched for her clothes scattered around the lawn. It took her more time than usual getting dressed, even with the bitter chill nipping at her bare skin. A few minutes later, the two had dressed and quietly walked around to the front of the house, making sure not to wake anyone inside.

Laura could feel the tension rolling in her stomach as she waited to face her friend. The time passed slowly for someone who had waited in anguish for the time to pass. Laura still felt that Heather would read the signs right off her face when they met. She feared this moment, but at the same time, just wanted to get beyond it.

Heather entered the classroom and ran over to where Laura sat in the back of the room. There were several minutes this Monday morning before the bell would ring and Laura could tell by the excited look on her face that Heather had some juicy news. She sat down in the seat behind Laura and threw her book bag to the floor.

“I had the most incredible experience this weekend,” Heather blurted out before Laura could say anything. Only a few other students occupied the room this morning and the two girls sat in a back corner all alone. Still, Heather spoke with a low whisper.

“Didn't we all?” asked Laura sarcastically, trying to relieve herself of some of the tension she felt. The remark didn't even daunt her friend.

“Nothing can compare to the wild things I did with old number 87,” stated Heather in a rather serious and demeaning tone.

“Did you ever find out his name?” Laura asked with surprise.

“We didn't have time to worry about such unnecessary information as names,” remarked Heather as she pulled out a container of deep red lipstick and fixed her make-up with a small mirror. “I've never felt so free and unrestrained as I did on Friday night. I'm telling you, Laura, I'm a changed woman. I'm not even going to waste my time on Todd anymore. Todd could never perform as well as the guy I had this weekend.”

“So you’re breaking it off with Todd then?” questioned Laura, watching her friend maneuver the glossy covering across her lips. She could smell Heather’s perfume, similar to the strong odor of wild flowers. Heather took much pride in her appearance, and always looked as if she just stepped out of a beautician’s parlor.

“Who needs him. He’s so wrapped up in himself. From now on I’m living my life for me, and me alone. I can’t worry about trying to make him feel better every time he drops a ball.”

Laura tried desperately to hide the smile emerging on her face. She quickly turned towards the front of the classroom as Heather dug through her book bag for a note pad. The small number of other students in the quiet room paid little attention to the chatter coming from the back.

“Have you even seen Todd since the game?” asked Laura, her back still turned towards Heather.

“No, he hasn’t bothered me all weekend long. I’m sure I’ll bump into him today, but even if he’s begging on his knees for me, I won’t take him back.”

Laura closed her eyes and relished the moment, feeling relieved that she wouldn’t need to compete against her best friend for Todd. She had known Heather practically her entire life, and though she wanted to go out with Todd desperately, she didn’t want to ruin their friendship.

“Are you going to see number 87 again?”

“No,” answered Heather. “It was just a weekend fling. Neither of us want anything more than we got out of the weekend. He’s over an hour away from here. I don’t want the hassle of a long distance relationship. We have a mutual understanding between one another. If we run into each other again, we’ll probably do it all over, but there isn’t anything more to our relationship than that.”

Laura shook her head and smiled at Heather as she turned around to face her. “Are you going to confront Todd and tell him it’s over then?”

“I’ll wait for him to come to me,” explained Heather as she placed her cosmetics back inside her bag. “Then I’ll break the news, or maybe I’ll just ignore him. There isn’t any reason to make people think he and I are still going out. I need to put the word out that I’m fair game again. Besides, I don’t owe him anything, not after the way he treated me the other night. How he sees our relationship doesn’t matter to me now. I know it’s over between us, and that’s all that counts.”

Heather looked up from her bag and directly at Laura. For a moment, Laura felt as if Heather could see right through her. A strange feeling crossed Laura as the look on Heather’s face changed to a seductive smile and her eye’s glanced over Laura’s shoulder.

Laura turned around to see the large form of Chris Garfield, another one of Harrison's more prominent football players. He had just entered the dingy, colorless classroom, and immediately noticed Heather sitting back in the corner.

The bright blue and white letterman's jacket he wore appeared to flaunt his dark hair. Laura knew he would wear the jacket throughout the entire class, and probably school day. He took much pride in his role on the field, and wouldn't let the warmth of the classroom force him into removing his prize.

He smiled back at the two girls who stared over at him, and walked over to his seat near the front of the classroom. Laura never wondered why guys were so quick to notice her friend. Not only did Heather have good looks, but she dressed in a fashion which made her distinctively stand out. Her classy wardrobe, which accented her shapely figure, kept her at the center of attention.

"I don't know about you, Heather," Laura spoke with a large grin across her face as she turned around to look at her friend again. "It doesn't take you any time at all."

"You seem like you're in a good mood today," uttered Heather, noticing the unusual cheerfulness in her friend. "The only time you smile like that is if you've taken a test and thought you did pretty well."

"I'd say I scored a pretty good grade," Laura assured her. She turned around and looked through her textbook. All the nervousness, which had stemmed from the anticipation of this moment, passed as she realized that one thing had worked out in her favor.

Laura and Heather walked up the hallway towards their second class. Like many close friends, they had matched their schedules as close together as possible, with only two classes allowing for separation. These two classes were a necessity, since Heather didn't want to take advanced calculus or honors English.

Students crowded the small hallway and made movement through the corridor quite slow. Laura caught sight of Todd at the end of the hall just seconds before Heather did. Todd noticed the two girls walking towards him from a distance. A deathly white tint flowed across his face at the sight of them together. Before the girls could reach him, he turned and headed back in the direction he had come from.

"I guess he isn't big enough to face me yet," uttered Heather, enjoying her feelings of confidence.

"You must just be too much for him to handle," spoke Laura, fighting back the laughter. "You must be some woman to scare him like that."

"Are you teasing me, Laura?" asked Heather.

“I’m sorry, Heather,” apologized Laura. “I just find this who situation quite humorous. I mean, you going off and having sex with another guy this weekend and then Todd won’t even speak to you. It almost makes you wonder who he spent the weekend with.”

Heather laughed with Laura. “It does seem rather funny, Laura, except that Todd isn’t man enough to cheat on me. He probably sat home drowning in his own pity the entire weekend. I bet he still feels guilty for what he said to me after the game. This will teach him to never treat another girl that way. Maybe the next girl he dates will benefit from his mistake with me. I just don’t understand why he’s so afraid to face me and apologize now. I never knew how big of a coward he was.”

“Why don’t you head to class without me, Heather. I need to stop at the restroom before class begins. I think I have something in my eye.”

“All right, I’ll save you a seat then.”

Laura turned down a separate hall from the one Heather walked. As she walked away from her friend, tears flowed down her cheeks from her own laughter. She turned the corner and busted down, loosing her composure as she laughed aloud. After several days of tension, the release felt good. She felt bad for Todd, but he had nothing to lose anymore. Laura didn’t want to lose her friendship with Heather.

“What’s so funny, Laura?”

Laura looked up in surprise towards the deep voice which caught her off guard. “Oh Todd, it’s only you. I thought maybe Heather had followed me. I figured I was caught for sure.”

Todd stood before her in the deserted walkway. Only the sounds of chaotic noise emitted from the main hallway, interrupted their solitude. He looked extremely confused standing there. Laura could tell from his face that he didn’t feel well. The empty corridor gave them a moment to speak with some privacy.

“What did you tell her about us?” asked Todd. He looked much smaller than she remembered. The scorn of his classmates and the look of terror on his face hid his usual commanding image. Laura had forgotten all about the game, and suddenly felt guilty for not paying him the attention he deserved.

Todd failed to wear his letterman’s jacket today. He knew it would add fuel to an already raging fire of emotional despair and didn’t want to constantly remind people of his role. Laura felt sorry for him and wished she could make it all go away. She couldn’t do anything about the pressure of his peers, but could relieve the anxiety about Heather.

“Nothing,” answered Laura. “Don’t worry though, she’s planning to break things off with you.”

Even in his lowly state, Todd looked inviting to Laura. The shy and timid side of him had never presented itself to her. It reminded her that they shared a common bond. Even the hero has

human qualities and sometimes fails. Laura had a love for the underdog, and he suddenly appealed to her more than she had realized. She could smell his cologne from where he stood and she smiled softly at him. She had to fight to hold herself back from him.

Todd smiled back at his mistress. "Why are you laughing so hard?"

"You just have to listen to her," Laura explained. "I never realized how conceited she was. I don't know how long I can go on like this. I know I'm gonna slip one of these times."

"No, Laura. We need to keep things quiet about us for a few weeks. I don't care if she hates me, but the two of you are best friends. I don't want to come between the two of you. Wait for a few weeks until she finds a new boyfriend. Then we'll act like we're just starting to date. If she found out about us now, she might never speak to you again."

"All right, Todd, you're right." Laura stood against the wall staring up at Todd. Even with the cool breeze drifting in from the opened windows, her tender blue eyes seemed to melt him as she looked him over. Her laughter had ceased, but a smile remained across her gleaming face. "You're the best, Todd. I can't believe things are working out so well for us. When can I see you again?"

"Soon, Laura," he answered. "I'll give you a call. I promise."

"I need to get to class," informed Laura hesitantly. "I'll talk to you soon, you promised."

"Count on it."

Laura ran back up the hallway towards her class. Todd watched her intently as she departed. She dressed differently than Heather, much more modestly. Her beauty seemed more natural, and he could hardly tell whether she wore make-up or not. She still couldn't hide her cute little figure from everyone, even with the unflattering attire.

Laura walked into the classroom a few seconds after the bell had rung. Her teacher looked up at her with a slight glare of anger in his eyes. His expression changed slightly as the surprise from her tardiness shocked him. It was very uncharacteristic of her to come late to class.

She walked to the other side of the room and sat down beside Heather. Laura felt much more at ease now, regaining her composure. She leaned over towards Heather and whispered quietly as her instructor began writing on the board.

"Guess who I ran into in the hallway," remarked Laura as she tapped Heather on the shoulder.

"Who?" questioned Heather, trying to avoid upsetting the teacher further. She could tell by the tone of Laura's voice that it was important.

"Todd."

"You mean he didn't run away this time?"

"I don't think he's afraid of me," suggested Laura.

"So what did he have to say?"

“I told him you weren’t interested in seeing him anymore.”

“What did he say to that?” asked Heather. The teacher stopped writing for a moment as he waited for silence in the rowdy classroom. Laura had to whisper over Heather’s shoulder.

“He didn’t say very much, but he seemed really upset.”

“It figures. He’ll be crawling back to me in a matter of days.”

“Don’t worry, Heather,” assured Laura. “I’m sure by then you will have forgotten all about him.”

The teacher turned to face his class and Laura looked down at her book. He informed the class they would begin now, and the students started to settle down.

Laura tried to concentrate on the word’s her teacher spoke, but found herself drifting off into a dreamy state of euphoria. The appeal of a boyfriend had never seemed like as good of an idea as it felt right now. Her excitement overcame her and she had lost her sense of reality. She felt like the luckiest girl in the world. She had everything, and her future looked promising. She had never wanted anything more than a chance to go to college, which she still greatly anticipated. The sudden allure of dating a wonderful guy had clouded that objective. Only one thing mattered to her right now, and she could only wait to hear from him.

Dr. Raymond Drake jumped when he heard the doorbell ring. He sat in the living room, lost in his thoughts when the noise interrupted his trance. Ray hadn’t accomplished much since receiving the call an hour earlier. He did not expect the call and he had sat around anxiously awaiting the arrival of his old roommate.

As he sat there, trying to recall the last time he had seen the man, he finally recalled the event in 1967. Eight years had passed since then, and he had almost given up on ever seeing the friend again. As he waited, a great longing had come over him. The memories of those careless days they spent in college reminded him of how old he had become. He wished he could revisit those days, even for a moment, and retaste his youth. He would get the chance now, as he climbed from his seat with a flare of excitement.

Ray hurried down the hall and opened the front door to find his familiar old friend. The contours of the man remained the same, though many small wrinkles now appeared on the matured man’s face. Ray’s face lit up with a smile at the sight of the man.

“Hello Edward,” welcomed Ray. “I have to look twice and make sure it’s really you. It’s been a long time. Please, come in.”

“It wasn’t too hard to track you down,” replied the man as he walked into the large entryway. He followed his host down the hallway and into the large living room. Ray and his wife had furnished the room elegantly.

Edward looked around the room with some interest while Ray fixed a couple of drinks. He sat on one of the two large couches in the room. A beautiful Japanese rug with soft colors lay at his feet. The comfortable sofa reminded Edward of the furniture the two men had in college. Ray had furnished the room in a manner that made it perfect for reading.

A large fireplace held a soft flame to add a hint of heat to this region of the house. The lightened shades of the room gave it a calming, earthy feel and the room contained many small handmade crafts and collectibles. The opened blinds allowed a slight amount of sun inside to brighten the room.

“Is anyone else home?” Edward asked, noticing the enticing smell of freshly baked food emanating from the kitchen.

“My wife is upstairs taking a nap,” answered Ray. “She should wake up in a little while and I’ll introduce you again. I think she’s only met you once before, and we didn’t have a chance to talk very much.”

“I would enjoy that.”

“So how long has it been, Edward?” asked Ray.

“The last time I saw you was at your graduation from medical school,” answered Edward. “That was over eight years ago. Looks like you’ve done well for yourself.”

“As long as people keep having children, I’ll be in business.”

“Business must be good. This is a beautiful home. I noticed pictures of children along the walls. I assume they’re all yours.”

“Yes,” answered Ray with a smile. “My wife Alice and I have two small children. Frank is three and Helen is only three months. Just a young family, we waited several years before we started having any kids. They’ve been a wonderful addition to our family. How about you, Edward? I think I remember you having a couple of children the last time I saw you.”

“Yes, my wife and I have three children now. They are all older. Alan, our youngest, is six. We decided we wanted children a few months after we were married. I think three is our limit. Alice has her hands full and wanted to quit.”

“I understand, Edward. I think we’ll wait a few years and have one more. We need to get the second one out of diapers before then.”

Edward continued to survey his surroundings, interested in his old friend’s home. His home seemed remarkably quiet, especially with two small children in the house. At this time in the afternoon, they had probably joined their mother in a nap. Edward felt glad for the time alone with his friend.

“Boy, you look so different,” noted Ray. “It really has been a while. What are you doing these days? You were still doing research the last time I heard from you.”

Ray walked over and handed the drink to his old friend. He remained unsure of the reasoning for the sudden visit. He felt nervous seeing his old friend again after all these years. An ambiguous sense of bewilderment made Ray feel weary that something had happened, and he anxiously awaited to find out what it was.

Edward took a small sip and closed his eyes as he savored the taste. Ray knew the wondrous flavor of the drink inside the glass. The warm sensation it gave as it worked its way to one's stomach was a sensation he remembered well. He joined his friend in savoring the flavor of the drink.

"Ahhh, the taste of fine brandy," remarked Edward.

"You didn't think I would forget," spoke Ray. "It was all we drank in college. Some of the bad habits you pick up in school you just never can break. I still enjoy a glass of brandy once a day."

Edward looked up at his old friend. In his late thirties, Ray looked remarkably well. He had taken good care of himself and had a wonderful home. Edward couldn't spot a strand of gray in Ray's dark brown hair, and he envied his friend's youthful appearance.

"Its been so long since school," reflected Edward. "Things have changed an awful lot the past few years."

"How so? You're still involved in your research, aren't you?"

"Oh yes," answered Edward without haste. "I've just chosen a new path in which to study. I'm trying to break out of the old grind and try something new."

"Aren't you still working with Dr. Evans?"

"Dr. Evans passed away about a year ago," answered Edward.

"I'm sorry, Ed, I hadn't heard a thing," remarked Ray as he sat down across from Edward on the other couch.

Edward looked extremely tired, and rather worn for his age. His ambition had always driven him to succeed at his ventures, and Ray felt quite certain that the years of painstaking work and effort had taken some toll. Edward's small frame and sharp, rough looking face hid the warm character that Ray had known so well through college.

"It's not a big deal. He was an old man when we were in college. I never expected the man to live forever. His death wasn't a surprise, he had been diagnosed with cancer several years earlier and slowly gone downhill. I needed to break away from his work eventually. This has given me the chance to work with some of my own ideas for a change. The opportunity has been most rewarding to me. Now it's time for me to move on and make my own name."

"Well," began Ray hesitantly. "I don't mean to sound so uninformed, but what exactly were you involved in with Dr. Evans? The last I heard he was still studying biological pathways

of the human fetus. Forgive my ignorance, but I don't know where he was headed with his work."

"Dr. Evans was deeply involved in late stage pregnancy growth," explained Edward. "By studying the reactions taking place in the unborn child, he hoped to extend the medical boundaries in maintaining premature children. His work was highly acclaimed."

"It sounds very interesting."

"It was incredibly interesting," assured Edward. "Much of what we learned is already applied in enhancing the environments for children born prematurely. We know many of the compounds needed by the young child to finish the cycles of growth that should have taken place inside the mother. We were able to finish many of the developments that needed to take place to ensure healthy babies. The wonder of it was that we could do this after the child had been delivered. We did extensive work with underdeveloped organs. It's incredible what you can do with the right environment to stimulate growth."

"You were working at a hospital back west with Dr. Evans, right?"

"Yes, we ran a special trauma center that treated premature children. Dr. Evans helped work with the doctors at the center to apply much of what we learned in our research. He was truly a leader in his field. I worked side by side with many of these small infants and their various physiological problems. It was very rewarding work, but it had heartbreaks also. You're involved in obstetrics, aren't you, Ray?"

"Yes," answered Ray. "I kept to the course through medical school. Now I live my dream of bringing new children into the world and working with mothers throughout their pregnancy. I still find myself mystified by the whole experience. Nothing could take me away from that. It sounds like you didn't falter to far off the path from working with children."

"Birth is one fascination of mine that I couldn't let slip away. Ever since college, it has been the focus of my research. Bringing children into the world and extending the limits where premature children might safely come into the world is my passion. I think I'll keep myself specializing in that part of research for many more years to come."

Ray stared over at his friend. The man looked older, but he could still remember the days of their youth, and it came back to him in a flurry. The awkwardness of the visit had already subsided, and he felt as if he could talk as openly with his friend as they did in college. They were the best of friends once, and a common bond still existed between them. Ray wanted to know what had happened in his old friend's life.

"So what do you do now?" questioned Ray. "Do you still work at the trauma center?"

"No," answered Edward. "I'm not a certified physician. I never finished medical school. Dr. Evans performed the procedures with the specialists at the center. I was in charge of the research end of our work. Dr. Evans applied what we learned from our work in the laboratory for

use by the medical community. There was no longer any work for me there with him gone. I had offers from several other physicians to stay on and begin work with them, but it wouldn't be the same. I don't want to have to work for anyone else anymore. So I left the trauma center about eight months ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that. It sounds like you really enjoyed your work, not to mention you probably were working with some really nice medical equipment at the center. Most labs aren't as technologically furnished as modern trauma centers. I often wish that we had some of the fancy equipment they have. That must be devastating to have your life's work drop out from under you."

"Not really," answered Edward. "It's given me the opportunity to return to the lab and continue the work I wanted to do in the first place. You see, once Dr. Evans made the breakthroughs in the field of late fetal development, he wanted to go into the hospitals and apply what we had learned. I wanted to remain in the lab and continue the research. We were just beginning to learn about what was going on and there was so much more we could have uncovered. Now with him gone, I've been able to do that."

"Where do you get your funding from?" asked Ray.

"I get limited funding through some of the organizations I worked with in the past, but even they want me to do specific work, and it isn't what I want to do. I transferred out here to a hospital upstate. I'm a medical technician in their trauma unit and I help the coroner perform some of his autopsies. They pay me pretty good money and I don't mind the work. I do my research in my free time."

"Do you use the technologies at the hospital for your research then?"

"No," answered Edward. "I work out of my own home. Most of the instruments I worked with while I was with Dr. Evans were his own that he had purchased with special grants. Towards the height of his career, he never even stepped into the laboratory. I was the only person operating the instruments. I took care of everything and managed all the maintenance. When Dr. Evans found out he was dying of terminal cancer, he made out his will to leave all the equipment to me.

I still do research, except I live by my own rules. I've made some incredible discoveries. With the right help I could change the face of medicine completely."

"That's a rather bold statement," replied Raymond with a chuckle.

"It's a cocky statement, Ray, but one I'm comfortable making. I know the seriousness of what I have learned. I just want to share it with the scientific community now."

"Just what is it that you've discovered?"

"Let me give you some background first," insisted Edward, eager to share his news. "I've become what might be termed as a mutual idealist. I like to combine two problems and allow

them to solve themselves. For instance, what are two of the biggest issues facing the world of pregnancy today?

“On one hand you have people who want children, and can’t get pregnant. They are forced to adopt. They want newborns, but there’s a limited supply of them. The demand for newborn children is extremely high and very costly.

“On the other hand, you have women who are pregnant and want abortions. They don’t want the burden of carrying these children, so they’d rather destroy the unborn child. To add in another factor to the equation, there’s all those people out there against the abortion process. Two very big problems in our society, and they’re steadily growing.”

Ray sat for a moment, waiting for his friend to continue. The conversation suddenly felt odd to him, and he didn’t know if he should take his old friend seriously or not. The whole topic sounded strange and alien to Ray, and he couldn’t think of a logical answer for his friend.

“So, do you plan to transfer all these unborn babies into the wombs of the pro-life demonstrators?”

“Close,” answered Edward with a smile.

“That was my best guess,” answered Ray, taking another sip of his drink. “There’s a big battle out there between pro-life and pro-choice people, and it’s brewing into war size proportions. It would be nice if you could find an answer to all those problems, but how are you going to solve all that? Those mothers don’t want the children because of the inconvenience or social pressures. Having a baby does terrible things for women prone to wearing bikinis. You can’t just persuade them all into having their children and then giving them up for adoption. It would be wonderful if you could, but it isn’t happening.”

“Well, what if you could save all those children by removing them and transplanting them into another uterus which would finish the pregnancy? A uterus willing to go through all that.”

“It couldn’t be done,” answered Ray firmly. “The new uterus would have to be at the same stage in the cycle as the unborn child and have all the other vital functions to complete the pregnancy. Transplant would be too costly and probably destroy the fetus in the process. Then you run the risk of the woman’s body rejecting the child, like a transplanted organ. Where are you supposed to come up with all these women to carry the large number of babies? It just isn’t feasible.”

“I don’t have to come up with anyone to carry the children. I have found a uterus that will accept any child no matter what stage of the pregnancy the child is in. I’ve found a uterus that will adjust to accommodate the child at any size.”

“You aren’t proposing what I think you are, are you?”

“Depends on whether you’re thinking about an artificial uterus,” answered Edward, stopping for a moment to let the suggestion sink in. “I already know everything the child needs to finish the gestation period outside the womb of the mother. I can simulate the entire process with a new device I’ve developed. Any fetus that is over two months into the gestation period could be transplanted to my artificial uterus to complete the pregnancy.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” uttered Ray in surprise.

“I’m not kidding. I’ve spent years on this subject. Dr. Evans wouldn’t pursue it with me. He didn’t think the scientific community was ready for such a concept. I think they are. It’s all ready to go. With modern science to help me, I know I can do it.”

Edward could sense that his friend didn’t believe what he told him. He felt strongly about this, and needed Ray to see things the way he did. He had to persuade Ray to believe him, and understand the importance of the work he did. Edward didn’t like making speeches to his friends, but Ray had to feel strongly about this.

“Think of all the lives that might be spared by such technology. You and I were good friends in college. We both wanted to go into obstetrics back then. We discussed the ethics of abortion quite often at the time. We shared a general opinion on abortion. What do you think of the concept of saving all those unborn children?”

“I know what you would have said back then to this sort of thing. It might seem like something impossible, but I’m here to tell you it is possible. You used to think as I do, the end will justify the means. The procedure is not an easy one, and I’m sure there would be intense debate about the subject, but what are your personal views about the possibility now, Ray? The possibility of saving the lives of children has worth.”

“You’re right, Ed,” answered Raymond without hesitation. “My personal views haven’t changed. I have a deep respect for life. Anything that might save so many lives should be fully looked into. I would support your ethics completely in such a task.”

“Then you’ll help me?” asked Edward. Ray noticed a glimmer of excitement in his friend’s eye. The zealous spirit of the man had always intrigued Ray. He knew Edward would someday move on to great endeavors through his work, but nothing like this had ever crossed his mind.

“What do you mean I’ll help you?” spoke Ray, almost upset. “Of course I’ll help you. You have my full support. I know about your abilities. I’ll stand behind you and your abilities as a scientist any day of the week. We have the same feelings on this subject. If you want somebody on your side, you know you can count on me.”

“I don’t mean help me by standing behind me,” stated Edward in a soft tone. “I’m not a medical doctor, Ray. My doctorate is scientific, and I don’t practice medicine. I don’t have the

ability to do such testing. Time is of the essence now. I need an unborn child to prove my device will work.”

Ray sat again for several moments. He felt as if Edward had never finished his last sentence, that there was more he wanted to say. Ray felt confused, but knew he had to break the silence.

“What are you getting at, Edward?”

“You can get me the unborn fetus.”

“I deliver babies,” stated Ray. “Where do I get a hold of a healthy unborn fetus.”

“I know you perform abortions,” answered Ed. “Don’t feel ashamed about it. I know a lot of doctors who perform them. There’s a demand out there for the procedure and it’s better that a trained professional does it than some back-street butcher. I wouldn’t have come to you for help if I knew you didn’t perform them.”

“It’s not something I like to discuss with people,” spoke Ray. “My own wife doesn’t even know I perform them. I didn’t ever want to perform an abortion. When I went into obstetrics, I did it because I wanted to bring new lives into the world. The miracles that happen during birth are incredible, but when you’re just starting out, you have to build up a list of patients. The only way I could do it was to join the women’s clinic. Abortions were a requirement of working there. We try to discourage them, but I sometimes cross paths with someone determined to terminate their pregnancy.”

“I knew abortions were a requirement,” answered Edward. “Where do you think I get the unborn fetuses I use in my research. I take part in many of the autopsies at the hospitals. We get them from all across the state. When I looked you up and found out you worked at one of the clinics where we get our cadavers, I decided to pay you this visit.”

“I’m not proud of what I do.”

“You don’t have to defend your actions to me,” assured Edward. “These fetuses are a key to our research. We could never have gained the knowledge we did without a steady supply of them. Dr. Evans had a hard time doing the research. The sight of all those dead children bothered him. It bothered me also, but I didn’t want to abandon my work. I chose to look at it as necessary, so I could learn and work towards ultimately changing the fates of future children. Working with unborn children has taken much of the life from me, but my latest work gives me new hope.

“I believed that sustaining children outside the womb was a possibility and I wanted to pursue the research, but Dr. Evans had problems with his conscience. As soon as he could get away from the work, he did. Our goal to save the lives of infants was the same, but our methods were quite different. That left me with little support to continue my own research. That’s all changed now, but trust me Ray, you’ll never see as many unborn children as I have witnessed.”

“I still don’t quite understand, Edward. If you have the fetuses coming in at a steady rate, then why do you need me?”

“I can’t perform any of the procedures on children who’ve been dead for several days,” explained Edward. “The procedure isn’t like creating a Frankenstein. I need to remove the child myself and immediately attach the child to the device. If the child goes more than a few minutes away from its mother, all will be lost. I couldn’t ask one of my colleagues to do the procedure. You’re the only person I know well enough to even suggest the idea to.”

“It’s very rare that I perform the procedures anymore. It might be weeks before I saw another patient for an abortion.”

“I still need some time to prepare for the operation. When a child becomes available, I’ll be ready.”

“But you know what something like this could do to my career,” stressed Ray. “We could never get away with it. If the mother went public about it, we would be destroyed by the medical community. It’s ethically unacceptable to perform the procedure without intense testing.”

“The mother would never know what you did,” answered Edward solemnly. “I can perform the procedure in a few minutes. I only have a short time span before the embryo dies once I separate it from the mother. This has been a large part of my research. The technique I developed requires no surgery. I use special tools to remove the embryo through the birth canal.

“The procedure must be done before the child reaches the stage of a fetus. All you have to do is put the mother down with anesthesia and allow me to perform the actual procedure. You said it yourself, Ray, if the end justifies the means, then ethics should not be a major consideration.

“I don’t want to wait for twenty years to get the procedure through testing. It would take years before anyone would even take it seriously. Just the suggestion could get me branded as a lunatic and I would lose the credibility and status I’ve built. The only way to be taken seriously is to come forward with a living child that has gone through the procedure.”

“You’re asking me to do something illegal, Edward,” explained Ray. “I could get in a lot of trouble for not performing the procedure I am hired to perform. You realize the legal consequences that might incur?”

“I know what I’m asking, Ray. I would only go public if everything worked out according to plan. We would rely on the nature of the situation to protect us from the law. Who would lock up two men who saved the life of an innocent child?”

“It will take a man very true to his convictions to take a stand like this. We would be violating so many laws that they couldn’t even be counted. I would need you with me when I went public with it. I’m not talking about moral support here, Ray. I’m asking you to take a

major risk and put your neck and your career out on the line. You have to trust that the world will see this the same way we see it. It solves everybody's problem."

"It just sounds too odd and unnatural," persisted Raymond. "It doesn't sit right with me."

"Think of how odd it sounded when doctors first decided to attempt a Cesarean-section. It probably seemed odd and unnatural also, but look at the lives of mothers and children that it has saved since then."

"I don't know, Edward," spoke Ray hesitantly.

"I won't force you into it. I want things to go right when I perform the procedure. I have to have you on my side though the procedure and I can't have you backing out once it is done. I know the stress and outcry that will become of all of this. It will completely change your life once everything is brought out to the public.

"If something goes wrong with the procedure, I'll handle everything. It will be treated like any other abortion. You will only be there to take part in the glory at the end and to aid me in the separation from the mother, but there's much more involvement than just that. Any involvement will place your reputation at risk. If you don't feel right about it, I don't want to involve you in it.

"I'll leave you my number where I can be reached if you change your mind. I know I've given you a lot to think about, I'll give you some time to consider it. Just remember Ray, I won't be upset if you decide not to do it. It's a lot to ask of a friend."

Edward set his half empty glass of brandy on the coffee table and stood up from the couch. Ray followed him to the door. He felt stunned by how quickly his friend got up to leave and hurried to cut him off at the door. Ray had completely forgotten about his hospitality.

"You don't need to leave so soon, Edward," urged Ray. "It's a shame to come all this way and not even have something to eat. You're welcome to stay for dinner. My wife's an excellent cook and we haven't seen each other in such a long time. I would like to hear more about your family."

"I would love to, Ray. Actually, I have to be leaving to get home. I spend a lot of time traveling, and my family sometimes suffers because of it. If I get on the road now, I can make it home for the dinner my own wife is cooking. Thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass. It's been nice seeing you again, Ray. Think it over, then give me a call."

Ray smiled as he opened the door for his old friend and watched the man walk out to his car. The old BMW backed slowly out of the driveway and quickly drove out of sight. Ray closed the door and turned around to find his wife walking down the stairway above.

She had her bathrobe on and looked extremely tired. She carried their small child in her arms, and she smiled down at him as she spotted him below. She had pulled her long hair up into a ball while she slept, but even after just waking up, she had a natural beauty about her.

“I’m sorry, honey, did we wake you?” Ray asked his wife.

“No, dear, Helen awoke from her nap.”

“You need your rest also, Alice,” Ray reminded his tired partner. “I can take her for an hour so you can finish your nap.” Ray took his young daughter in his hands and held her close to his chest.

“No, Ray, I feel fine. Besides, you aren’t quite equipped to feed your daughter like I am. Did your friend already leave?”

“Yeah,” Ray answered in a concerned tone. “He just drove away before you woke.” Ray followed his wife to the kitchen. His young daughter stared up at him contently.

“I guess he won’t be staying for dinner then?”

“No, it wasn’t a very long visit.”

“Is something wrong, Ray?” Alice asked. She sensed that something bothered her husband.

“Not really, dear. Seeing him again brought back some old memories. He always was a person with radical ideas. I never realized how old I was until I saw him just now. Boy, it was a long time ago that we were in college together. I kind of miss his energy and excitement.”

“We all grow old, Ray. So what’s he doing now? Is he an obstetrician?”

“No, dear,” answered Ray. “He works with premature children. He’s closer to a pediatrician, but he isn’t a medical doctor. He’s involved in research.”

“Well, that would be a rewarding career. I think it would be great to wake up each morning and know that something you’re working on could open new doors to save somebody’s life. Is he happy with what he does?”

“He seems really happy,” answered Ray. “You think his work is rewarding? I mean, I’m sure he sees a lot of heartbreaks.”

“Probably, but somebody has to do the research. It takes all kinds to win the fight for premature children. Any work that could help save the lives of unborn children would be rewarding.”

“But what if that work becomes controversial? I mean, at some point we might cross the line in research. At what point do we try to control life and death to the point where we become like our own creator in making decisions about who lives and who dies.”

“Earth to Ray, please return to orbit, dear,” spoke Alice as she looked oddly at her husband.

“I’m not making any sense, am I?”

“No, dear, you’re making sense. You and Edward obviously talked about something he’s doing that could save lives, and now your worried about whether he should do it or leave the fate of a child’s life in the hands of God. Whatever he’s doing, it’s upset you.”

“It doesn’t upset me, Alice. I agree with his ideals, but what he’s proposing is extremely controversial. I question whether it should be done or not. It just seems as if he’s trying to play God.”

“Do you have such little faith, Ray?” questioned Alice. “I think you’re looking at it all wrong. Research doesn’t get anywhere without being controversial. I believe God has the final say in everything we do. If you cross the line with something that you are doing to try to save a life, and God really doesn’t want that life to walk on this world, then you will fail at what you are attempting to do. By doing research, you aren’t testing your ability as a god, you’re testing whether your God really wants you to succeed with your ideas.”

“What if you suffer grave consequences from your peers and the rest of the community for saving a life?” responded Ray. “What if it changed your life, maybe for the worst, and complicated things severely?”

“The answer lies in your arms, Ray. Look at the life you’re holding right now. You have to look at a child just like the one in your arms and ask yourself if it’s all worth it. The answer will lie in your heart, Ray. You know what my answer is.”

Ray looked down at his young daughter who had fallen asleep in his arms. His wife pulled several items from the refrigerator and began dinner. Ray turned around from the kitchen and walked back down the hallway and up the stairs towards his room to lay the child down in her bassinet. He marveled at how simple his wife could make the answers to a complicated situation.

Chapter Four

Saturday arrived early for Margaret, as her parents rushed her for the trip. Amy had awoken with the family and shared the large breakfast before they dropped her off at her own home. Margaret still felt tired after the busy day of repelling and the late evening discussions with Amy the night before.

Margaret stared out the window of the car at the vast open space. She could see for miles without the hindrance of a large mountain hiding what might lurk behind it. Margaret didn't feel comfortable unless she knew what lay beyond the objects which blocked her view of the world.

Growing up in Deer Hollow, she began hiking at a young age. Even as a child she would sneak away from her house and wander off farther than her mother permitted in order to explore her world. She had climbed most of the mountains which surrounded her small town before she reached her teens.

Because of her interest in mountain climbing, she had learned to climb steep rocks and repel down cliffs at an early age. Her parents realized she would climb whether they liked it or not, and so her father had paid for her to take classes from a professional. They knew that they couldn't keep her from her exploration, so they decided to make it as safe as possible.

Margaret enjoyed the mountains for recreation, but felt more at home in the wide vastness of the open range. Here things seemed free of the seclusion she often experienced in her own hometown.

She felt particularly happy now as she and her parents drove into the city. Today they would shop for a dress for her graduation. She looked at graduation as a step in the right direction. Like most people her age, she had reached the point in life where she didn't always agree with her parents' opinions, or more correctly, almost never agreed. They were good parents, and she deeply loved them, but their ideas no longer seemed rational to her. She was the youngest in the family, and the hardest to let go. Her absence would signal the end of hands-on parenthood for her mother and father, and they didn't seem eager to see her leave.

Margaret could remember back to the times she was a young child. Her parents and she seemed to communicate much better then. The onset of adolescence ended that smooth flowing talk between them, and she found their reasons for denying her certain freedoms illogical. Her parents dealt much better with her older siblings, and she felt that she would get along better once they treated her more like an adult. Freedom in her eyes stemmed from adulthood, and she looked forward to taking that step. Her parents would always seem old-fashioned to her, but at least by moving on to college, she would advance to a new level in her parent's eyes.

The dress they shopped for stood out in her mind as a symbol of a new freedom. She would leave the town she grew up in to experience the world. Margaret lived for new

experiences. College life seemed like a dream to her, but now that dream wandered within her grasp.

Margaret sat quietly in the back seat of the car as her father drove the large vehicle into the parking lot of the mall. This Saturday, dozens of cars searched the full lot for a spot to park. Obviously, others had interest as well in buying new clothes for the end of school and beginning of summer.

Dr. Drake found somebody leaving their stall and slowed down to wait for the opening. Minutes later, the three walked through the doors and into the large air conditioned building. Inside, the mall hustled with excited shoppers looking for the perfect purchase.

Ray stopped before they walked very far and stretched slightly, recognizing the soreness in his muscles as a signal that old age had overcome him. Sitting in the car for the hour drive had left him cramped up, and he didn't look at the crowded mass of people with the same vigor and vitality that his wife and daughter did. Margaret saw the state of confusion as an opportunity, something she learned from her mother. Ray viewed it as a part of life, and something he couldn't avoid, though he would much like to.

Margaret and her mother soon separated from her father so they could search through the numerous stores for the perfect dress. Her father headed off to the sporting goods store, expecting to find a place of solitude from the hectic scene which sat before him. Like most of the men in the mall this day, he made the mistake of believing that he was the only person that such an idea occurred to, and would soon learn otherwise. Before leaving, he promised to meet back with them in a few hours to give his insight for the final selection.

The time passed by quickly as Margaret and her mother moved frantically through the mall. It was at the fifth store they entered that they finally found what they wanted. By then, the two hours had completely passed and they had to race to meet her father at the rendezvous point. He had beaten them there and calmly awaited their return.

“Did you find anything?” asked Raymond.

“I think we've narrowed it down to two selections,” answered his wife. “We need you to come with us and see the dresses on her to decide which one you think is the perfect choice.”

Margaret's mother explained the dresses to Raymond as they walked down to the store where the salesperson had them on hold. Margaret walked ahead of her parents, and didn't appear to pay much attention to the chatter of her mother. She entered the store first, and asked specifically for the red dress to try on first for her father's approval. She slipped off to the dressing room while her parents waited outside.

There were several other customers shifting through the clothes on the racks of the store. Alice waited patiently with a blue dress held over her arm. They were a safe distance from the dressing room when Alice voiced her opinion to her husband.

“She really likes the red dress, Ray,” explained Alice.

“So why do you have the blue one then?” Ray asked.

“I think it’s a little bit revealing. I like the blue dress. It leaves more to the imagination. She’s counting on you to pick the red dress. I just think that the blue dress makes her look more professional. I want her to look tasteful in her graduation photos. I really hope you like the blue dress better.”

“Why Alice, if I didn’t know better, I might think you were trying to persuade me into taking your side on this one.”

The conversation stopped short by the sound of the dressing room door opening up behind the two. Ray turned around to see the stunning figure of his daughter walk out in the elegant dress.

“Wow,” Ray uttered as he looked the dress over carefully.

Margaret smiled an embarrassed smile and looked down at her feet. Her face matched the color of the dress as she stood still biting her lip.

“Mom thinks it’s revealing, but I love it. The other dress makes me look like a little kid.”

“This dress really makes it clear that you aren’t our little girl anymore,” agreed Ray. He looked over and smiled at his wife who had an expression of surprise capped by anger across her face. “Looks like our youngest daughter has become a beautiful young woman, Alice,” he finished.

Alice handed the blue dress back to the salesperson to place back on the rack, surrendering to defeat. She came to terms with her upset quite quickly, though it wouldn’t show in her eyes for some time. Ray looked back at his daughter who stood with a gleam in her eye. She ran over to him and gave him a hug. Ray enjoyed the joyous show of affection. Independence came at a cost, and it was rare that she did this anymore.

“Thanks daddy,” Margaret uttered as she stepped back from him.

“Well, turn around a few times, let me get a better look at this heartbreaking dress we’re going to buy.”

She turned around several times, allowing him to survey the beauty of the dress and the astonishing creature it covered. Ray watched with pride as she displayed her stunning features to her parents and several other customers who looked over at her. She had indeed blossomed into a beautiful woman.

Ray glanced over her shoulder to notice one of the other customers in particular. The older woman stared directly at him and sent a slight chill down his spine as he struggled to place where he knew her from. It was a face he had not seen in many years.

The woman began walking closer to him, never taking her eyes off his face. Astonishment filled his thoughts as the memories of the woman came rushing back to him.

“Raymond Drake,” the woman uttered as she got close enough to take a good look at him.

“Yes,” he answered. “Cheryl, how have you been?”

“I’m just fine.”

Ray stood silently for a few seconds before he realized that his wife and daughter did not recognize the woman, not that Margaret would. He quickly regained his senses and reached out for the hand of his wife.

“Alice, you remember Cheryl Penn, Edward’s wife,” Ray explained.

“Oh yes,” answered Alice. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even recognize you. You look great.”

“Why thank you. You both look as young as the last time I saw you.”

“How long has it been?” asked Ray, searching his thoughts.

“Not since the funeral,” Cheryl answered.

“It has been a while. How are things for you?” asked Alice.

“Wonderful,” explained Cheryl. “My kids have all grown up and moved away. I have eight grandchildren and I remarried about five years ago. My husband and I moved into a small house just outside of town about three years ago. Life’s dealt me a pretty good hand since Edward’s death, but I still miss him.”

“We all do,” Ray agreed.

“This lovely creature must be your daughter,” Cheryl uttered staring at Margaret in her dress. “That looks just wonderful on you, dear. Don’t wear that too often, it’s sure to break some hearts.”

“Thank you,” answered Margaret in a bashful voice.

“Come on, Margaret,” spoke Alice. “Let’s go pay for this dress and let your dad and Cheryl talk for a minute.”

Margaret walked back to the dressing room to change her clothes, while her mother walked over to the cash register to pay for the dress. Ray and Cheryl walked out of the store for a little bit of privacy. They reached a bench in the mall and sat down to talk. Ray felt surprised to see Cheryl’s eyes filled with tears as he looked over at her.

“It’s her, isn’t she?”

“What are you talking about?” Ray asked, confused by the question.

“Edward’s experiment,” Cheryl answered. “Tell me that’s the child Edward was trying to keep alive.”

“I thought you didn’t know.”

“I always knew, Ray.” He noticed a sudden look of guilt creep over her face, and she immediately spoke to explain herself. “You have to understand that at the time I had no idea what I was going to do with her. I couldn’t go public at that point in time. My husband had just

died and I didn't know the first thing that needed to be done for her. Edward hadn't told me anything about her until a week before his death."

"So you knew all along that I had taken her?"

"I wasn't sure if she was still alive or not," Cheryl answered. "I had friends and family over as soon as the police came by with the news of Edward's death. He was only going out for something to eat and was supposed to be back in less than an hour. He spent most of his time at home keeping tabs on her progress. I went along with the innocent act because I didn't know what you wanted to do at that point."

"Then you aren't upset that I never published any of his work?" asked Raymond.

"Like I told you, I had no idea if she had survived or not. Is it her?"

"Yes, we're here picking out her graduation gift."

"Wow," remarked Cheryl. "She's already graduating. Does she know anything about her past?"

"No," Ray answered. "My wife and I decided we would raise her as one of our own. I didn't want her life to be under the spotlight. I know very little about what Edward was doing with his device. I've been reading his research carefully and have most of it prepared for publication.

I wanted her to have the same upbringing as most kids get. I thought that if I could present a fully grown and normal child to society when we go public, it will back up our work even more. I couldn't give her that kind of upbringing if she was the focus of global interests."

"So you do plan to tell her the truth?"

"She'll be eighteen in less than three months. I made a promise to my wife to not tell her anything until her eighteenth birthday. That's when I'll publish everything and allow her to choose if she wants to go public or not. It will change her life drastically. I almost don't want the truth to come out. But I know I have to tell her sometime."

"I'm sorry, Ray," spoke Cheryl, with tears still in her eyes. "I'm sorry I lied about not knowing about her and leaving you to take care of her. I just felt so helpless without Edward. I didn't know what I would do with a new baby that I didn't know how to care for."

"She's a perfectly normal child," Ray assured her, "but don't apologize, Cheryl. Margaret has always been a welcome addition to our family. I wouldn't change a thing now if I could. I almost don't want her to have to be there when I take it public, I'm pretty protective of her."

"Give her some time to understand everything before you go to the media with any of the research," remarked Cheryl. She pulled out a pencil and paper and began writing something down on it. "When she's ready for you to tell her about everything, here's my address and phone number. I would like to meet her and sit down with her. I think she should know a little bit about Edward. He was the man who brought her into the world."

“Agreed,” answered Ray. “You’re as big a part of this as anyone else. I won’t go forward with anything until you’ve had an opportunity to talk with her face to face about it. When she’s ready to confront the issue, I’ll bring her to you. You can help show her Edward’s side of the work.”

The two old friends were interrupted by Margaret and her mother coming from the store with the dress. Ray’s wife looked over at him making sure it was clear for them to bother the two. Cheryl answered her question for her.

“You’ll look just stunning for your graduation, my dear,” Cheryl spoke to the young girl who stood with her mother. “Now if you’ll all excuse me, I have to be getting back to my shopping. Congratulations on your accomplishment, young lady, it’s something to be proud of.”

Cheryl stood up from the bench and patted the hands of Margaret and her mother as she walked past them. Alice looked over at her husband with a puzzled glance and then back over at her daughter. Margaret seemed unaffected by the unexpected encounter.

“How’s Cheryl doing, dear?” Alice asked her husband.

“She seems to be doing really well,” answered Ray as he wrapped an arm around his wife and led his family towards the exit of the mall. Margaret could hardly look up from the box containing the dress that she carried so proudly in her arm.

The ride home that afternoon went by much faster. Margaret thought about her dress, and dreamed of how her graduation night would turn out. Something had bothered her about the trip, but she didn’t know what it was. Soon, the previous night’s events came back to her, and she found her thoughts returning to Amy. The new information must have come as a shock to her, and Margaret wondered what Amy thought about right now. It seemed silly, and she knew that back in Deer Hollow, Amy’s mind worked furiously, trying to imagine why she had never known her father.

Laura lay with her eyes shut under the warm covers of her bed. Her room in the basement always felt cool, and she had to wrap herself tightly beneath the blankets to keep her body heat locked inside. It was long past midnight, and the house remained totally silent.

Laura had finished writing in her journal an hour earlier and turned out the lights. Her thoughts overflowed with visions of the future. Almost a week had passed since her encounter on her back porch, but she had already planned the next few months of her romance. Now she could only wait for the next appearance by her secret lover.

Laura couldn’t sleep. She just lay there with her eyes closed, trying to clear her thoughts so she could get some rest, but it did her no good at all. Her mind remained focused on the same thing which had filled her thoughts for the past two days. His face seemed permanently scribed on the back walls of her mind.

A light banging on her bedroom window startled her as she opened her eyes and prepared to lash out at anything that moved. Laura had a deep fear of unknown sounds in the dark. She started to let out a scream, but stopped herself before any sound flowed from her lips.

The tapping noise sounded again, and she could make out the silhouette of a man hiding in the moonlight which streamed into her bedroom. Anticipation overcame fear as she ventured from her bed towards the window to investigate the lurking prowler. She picked up her tennis racket on the way to the window, in case she needed a weapon to defend herself.

Laura leaned up against the wall and slid a corner of the curtain away to peek outside. She instantly recognized the individual who matched the image that haunted her like an unrelenting spirit. He wore blue jeans and his letterman's jacket. She moved into his view and cracked the window so she could speak with him. The old frame of the window creaked just slightly as it opened.

"What are you doing here, Todd?" she asked in an excited, but extremely low whisper.

"I couldn't stand to not see you," answered the soft voice. "I'm sorry to wake you, I just had to come over and see you once before I close my eyes for the night."

"That's so sweet," she sighed. "I couldn't sleep either. I just can't seem to get you out of my mind."

"Well don't try so hard. It's nice to know you're thinking about me too. I had hoped you wouldn't forget about me."

"Not on your life," she assured him. She stood for several seconds staring into his deep eyes. They looked so inviting under the moonlight. The chill from outside brought her back to her senses as her skin became riddled with thousands of little bumps.

"Would you like to come outside and go for a walk?" Todd invited.

"I'm not even dressed," she informed him. She slowly pulled the old window open wider, so he could fit through. "Here, come on inside."

"What about your parents?"

"The whole family went to sleep hours ago. Don't worry, Todd, they'll never know. Now come in, you're letting all the warm air out."

Todd slipped down into the window well and lowered his legs through the window. He arched his back and he used his arms to gently drop down to the floor of Laura's bedroom. She wondered at his strength as she watched him.

He turned around and looked Laura over. She wore a long night shirt to bed. It flowed down her shapely curves to stop halfway up her thighs, covering her completely, but still flattering her. She wore her hair in a ponytail to bed. Laura closed the window behind him and quickly walked over and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Todd welcomed the invitation and gently wet her lips with his own. The bitter chill of his skin didn't bother her as she helped him out of his jacket. They gently dropped the jacket on the floor as she grabbed his hand and led him over to sit down at her bedside.

"This isn't exactly the easiest place to talk," he whispered lightly. Laura could sense the nervousness in his voice. She knew he was right, the sound of voices might wake her parents.

"I wasn't really in the mood to talk anyway," she whispered in reply. "Why don't you lay down with me a while. It would feel nice just to hold you for a while."

Todd leaned over and unlaced his shoes. Laura had already returned to her position beneath the covers when he slid in beside her. She laid her head down on his chest as he wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close to him. His arms felt good holding her after several days of longing for his touch.

Laura lay on his chest for several minutes, listening to the pounding of his heart. She explored the contours of his chest with her free hand, slowly unbuttoning his shirt to feel his bare skin. Seconds later she found her lips gently kissing his as she looked down at his face.

The uninhibited teens quietly released their feelings of hesitation and began to more intimately share one another's company. Time seemed to stand still as layers of clothing fell carelessly to the side. Before she realized how far they had gone, Laura found herself lying beneath his naked body, urging him to continue.

Laura placed a single finger against her lips, reminding him that they had to keep things quiet and then willingly welcomed him to carry on. The two lovers broke free of all hesitations. Their bodies became tangled in a slow moving embrace and Laura felt a new comfort in his arms.

Her quiet moans moved Todd with incredible desire. He tried desperately to hold back, but soon surrendered to nature. Laura felt his body tense up and longed to express her feeling with verbal sound. She held back her vocal expressions, fighting the strange sensations that the moment had unlocked.

Todd collapsed in the sheets beside her and she moved closer to him to share his warmth. The smell of his wet, rough skin enticed her senses. She felt more comfortable this time, and had taken a more active role in the encounter. It seemed strange how natural her instincts were, even though they were carnal instincts, and not something she would usually pride herself on. Things felt right now, and she didn't find herself regretting anything which had occurred. The physical satisfaction she gained had all but buried any feelings of guilt which might creep up to bother her. Laura closed her eyes and soon lost herself in the wonder of her dreams.

Laura woke to the sound of birds chirping outside her window. The light from the morning sun had slowly crept towards her bed from the window and began to warm her face. She opened her eyes and looked over to the window, wondering if it was just a dream.

Laura felt completely rejuvenated from her relaxing sleep. She couldn't recall a morning in a long while where she had felt so refreshed and ready to begin the day. She slowly stretched her muscles as she spread out across the fullness of her bed.

A feeling of terror came over her as her hand came to an abrupt halt against the solid object beside her. She explored the object with her hand, hoping that it was not what she feared. A low moan arose from the object as it moved beneath her grasp.

Laura jumped up in her bed and placed a hand over Todd's mouth. His eyes opened in confusion as he tried to figure out where he was. A fearful expression crept over him as he stared up at the naked girl before him. Laura looked over at her clock sitting on the night stand. There were still three minutes before the alarms would start ringing throughout the house, signaling the inhabitants to wake up.

"Quick," she whispered in panic. "Get your clothes on, you have to leave before my parents wake up."

Todd jumped from the bed and scurried around the room, trying to locate his clothes scattered across the floor. Laura watched in amazement at the speed he exercised as he threw on his clothes. Laura hurried over to the window and quietly opened it, trying not to make too much noise.

She turned around to see Todd scurrying to lace up his shoes. As she stood in front of the window, eagerly awaiting his departure, the chill creeping in from outside reminded her that she was naked. She ran over to her door and threw on her robe as Todd stood up and hurried towards the open window.

The sounds of clock alarms going off throughout the house broke the morning silence in the background. Laura helped give him a boost up to the window as the sounds of footsteps from the floor above them alerted the two that others in the house were awake.

"Oh no," worried Laura aloud. "What about your car?"

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I walked."

"Be careful. Make sure nobody sees you."

"Are any of the back windows open?" he asked, trying to figure out an escape route.

"They shouldn't be."

"Good," he uttered with relief. "I'll see you at school."

"What will your parents say when you're not in your bed when they go to wake you?"

"I go out running in the morning all the time," he assured her. "The hard part is getting away from here without getting caught."

Todd waved good-bye and crawled against the wall of the house towards the backyard. She listened for a minute for someone to catch him sneaking away, but all was silent.

The sound of her door opening behind Laura startled her as she turned to face the door. Her mind furiously searched for a story as her mother looked over at her oddly. Laura realized that she hadn't done her robe up tightly and much of her skin remained uncovered.

"What are you doing standing in front of an open window without any clothes on?" asked her mother with a look of total confusion etched across her face.

"I was burning up," Laura exclaimed. "Doesn't it feel hot down here?"

"No," answered her mother firmly. She walked over and placed her hand on Laura's forehead, feeling for a temperature. "You feel fine to me?"

"Well, I was just headed to the shower," Laura explained. "It must be getting close to my period or something."

She closed the window behind her as she tightened up the robe and walked down the hall to the bathroom. Her mother followed her, still confused, but not doubting the story. She walked past the bathroom and climbed the stairs towards the kitchen as Laura turned on the light.

"Hurry up," called her mother back to her. "Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes. After that, you can fend for yourself."

Laura and Heather sat huddled together in the bleachers with a blanket wrapped around them. The umbrella held over their heads protected them from the densely falling rain from above, but the bitter chill of the air made leading any cheers impossible. The squad decided to call it a night and join the crowds in the stands as they finished watching the game. After losing two games straight, the crowd didn't really seem that enthusiastic. Laura just wanted the game to end. She hadn't seen Todd in some time, and wanted their relationship to consist of more than just weekly engagements. Exchanged glances in the hallway between classes didn't match up to her expectations, but she knew in the end they would be together. It was just a matter of time.

"So do you think we'll lose this game too?" Heather asked.

"That's an awful attitude for the head cheerleader to have," scorned Laura. "They're just in a slump right now. They'll snap out of it."

"Oh, come on, Laura," defended Heather. "We haven't won a game since homecoming. This will be our third straight loss. They're wiping up the field with us. We have four minutes left to score four touchdowns just to tie the game up. Face it, we stink. We probably won't even be invited to play in the state tournament. It's been almost ten years since a Harrison football team didn't make it to the state tournament. Our team is pathetic."

“They could still snap out of it,” assured Laura optimistically. “There’s three games left in the regular season. If we win all three, we automatically get an invitation because we won our first two games this year. Any team with a winning record gets invited to the tournament.”

“I don’t think so,” answered Heather. “We can’t even win against a team like this. Our last three games are against three of the toughest teams in our region. We might be lucky to squeeze out one win, but three in a row, try again.”

Laura ignored the negative comments about the team. She still had a glimmer of hope that the team could pull things off. The year had gone so well, better than her wildest dreams. Everything had fallen into place perfectly, her entire life felt as if it had meaning. The only thing she could think of to make it better was for the football team to at least go to the state tournament.

She had dreams of running out onto the field and throwing her arms around Todd as he regained his title as the town hero. Laura knew he still had the potential to lead the team to the tournament. She felt so proud of him, and she just wanted the rest of the town to give him the credit he deserved. She wanted to stand by him as he stood tall when he walked down the street.

Laura watched as one of Harrison’s players broke free from the pack and ran the ball down to the end zone. She recognized his number under the bright lights and jumped up to cheer him on before he crossed the line. The crowd of wet and cold spectators roared to life joining her.

Heather jumped up beside her and placed each of her pinkies in her mouth, releasing a loud, sharp whistle. She stopped suddenly as she recognized the numbers on the jersey of the player.

“It’s just Todd, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” lied Laura. “Even if it is, what does it matter, it’s our first touchdown of the game. We’re supposed to get excited when we score, it’s sort of our job out here.”

Laura had tired of Heather’s constant remarks about Todd. The sneaking around behind Heather’s back had riddled her conscience with guilt. She wished she could stand up to her friend and defend him. She knew that her relationship with Todd might cost her a friendship she dearly cherished.

The two girls sat back down and tried to wrap the blanket back around them. Even the long johns which they wore under their outfits had gotten wet and couldn’t insulate their shivering bodies. Heather could hear her friend’s teeth chattering rapidly together.

Heather’s face looked like an actress from a Greek tragedy. Her make-up had run during the evening rain shower, leaving large black patches beneath her eyes and her hair rested flimsily down the sides of her face. The rain had soaked both of the girls, and their outfits weighed several pounds more than before the game.

“So what are you doing after the game?” asked Heather, wiping some of the eye shadow from her face with a handkerchief.

“I’m not sure yet,” Laura answered. “I feel like just heading home and going straight to bed. I think I might be coming down with something. I’ve been getting really weak the past few days.” It was the truth, but in the back of her mind, she wished for something else.

Laura couldn’t even explain how tired she felt. Her muscles cramped up and she had noticed that regions of her skin were extremely tender. Her energy level had dropped drastically and she didn’t feel like doing much of anything, except maybe to see Todd. It was the thoughts of Todd, and the need to see him that had brought her here. If not for him, she would probably lie in bed right now, fighting off the sudden ailment. Watching him play had brought her here.

“Well, they have a dance after the game,” explained Heather. “I thought I might go there and see if anyone’s feeling lucky tonight. My sex life has sort of hit a slump of its own. I thought I could at least help one of our football players make a score tonight. You ought to come with me. Maybe we’ll both get lucky.”

“I don’t think so,” Laura declined. “The sound of some warm tea and a long night’s sleep sound much more inviting right now.”

“If you don’t come, you’ll never know if this was your night to meet Mr. Right.”

“I can live with myself,” Laura assured her.

The girls continued to watch as the opposing team ran out the clock and the buzzer sounding the end of the game went off. The stands were already half empty once the crowd realized an upset was inevitable. Laura and Heather had little trouble making it through the remainder of the hometown fans.

The somber mood of the crowd matched their cold, wet appearances as people headed home. A musty odor filled the air around them. The evening had turned out miserable for all involved and Laura couldn’t understand why Heather thought something might happen tonight.

Laura walked with Heather to the doors of the school building, using the umbrella to keep Heather from absorbing any more rain into her clothes. Heather turned around as she walked in the door to make one more attempt at coaxing her friend to the dance.

Laura explained that her body ruled her mind and her body told her to go home and climb in bed. She turned around and walked quickly down the long line of cars in the parking lot. The crowd of people had quickly vanished as they hurried to get out of the rain, and only a few stragglers drifted by, running to their cars.

Laura reached her car at its stall, but walked on to a far corner of the lot. The familiar old pickup truck sat with its engine running, as if the driver expected someone. She looked around to see if anyone noticed her as she pulled open the passenger side door and jumped inside.

“Hi,” smiled the familiar face as she leaned up against her boyfriend. He still wore his muddy uniform.

“Hi, Todd, I’m sorry you guys lost again.”

“Somebody has to lose the game,” Todd answered. “Do you want to go do something. I’d like to get my mind off football for awhile.”

“I’m really tired tonight,” Laura explained, “but I’m up for some quiet conversation if you want to go somewhere and talk for a bit.”

“That sounds nice,” he agreed as he started the truck out the parking lot. Laura closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of rain softly hitting the roof of the old truck. The warmth from the truck’s heater mixed with the sedating sound of the rain helped her relax as the two drove to a quiet spot.

Heather stared into the mirror in the girls’ bathroom, trying to fix her make-up. The morning school bell had rung, and Laura still sat hunched over the toilet in one of the stalls. Heather could hear the sounds of Laura’s convoluting stomach as she emptied it in the porcelain bowl. A few moments later, Laura emerged from the stall with several tissues to wipe her mouth, trying to get rid of the taste.

She walked over and stood next to Heather, looking into the dirty mirror. The gray tiles throughout the restroom gave it a depressing feel against the dim lighting, and the smell of air fresheners, mixed with mildew from the under ventilated facility, made Laura’s stomach even more queasy.

“What’s the matter, Laura, a little morning sickness?” joked Heather.

“My breakfast must not have agreed with me,” answered Laura back. She wore jeans and a sweat shirt. Heather could tell by looking at her that Laura felt really sick. Laura rarely wore tons of make-up, or took the effort preparing her outfits for school like Heather did, but Heather knew she usually did more than this.

“This is the third time you’re breakfast hasn’t agreed with you this week,” Heather continued.

“I think I might have caught some sort of stomach flu,” Laura defended.

“It’s rather funny if you think about it,” laughed Heather. “That should be me hunched over that toilet, not you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well Laura, you see, I’m the one who’s over two months late on her period. I’m the one who should have morning sickness right now. Maybe you just caught the morning sickness I should be having,” Heather teased. “It must be awful to have to deal with that when you’re still a virgin.”

“You’re pregnant?” asked Laura with surprise, ignoring Heather’s other remarks. “Have you been tested yet? What are you gonna do?”

“Don’t act so alarmed. It’s not like it’s a big deal or anything. I’ll take care of it.”

“Have you talked to Todd about it yet?” questioned Laura as a feeling of helplessness came over her.

“Why should I talk to Todd about it. I don’t want anything to do with him. It isn’t his child anyway.”

“Then whose child is it?” asked Laura, extremely relieved, but interested in Heather’s answer.

“Well, according to my Biology textbook,” explained Heather. “The act had to take place during the period of time following the homecoming game. That is, if my body acts like clockwork, which it does. There was only one person I had any kind of act with during that time. In fact, we did it several times in one night. That night just so happened to be the most fertile time during my cycle, so I’m pretty sure who the father of my child is.”

“Number 87.”

“Bingo,” answered Heather. “Anyway, I have an appointment with my doctor next week. I don’t see any reason to worry about it until then.”

“How can you be so relaxed knowing you might be pregnant?” Laura asked. She felt bitter at her friend for acting so relaxed and looking like her usual self, even though she claimed she was pregnant.

“It isn’t the end of the world. Actually, if I am pregnant, then the worst thing that could happen already has happened. So I can enjoy sex even more than before.”

Heather looked over at her friend who stood in awe. She could tell that Laura felt nervous about the news, and wanted to calm her down. She smiled softly at her good friend.

“Don’t worry, Laura. I can take care of the baby.”

The remark seemed to relax Laura, as she smiled back and returned to fixing her appearance. Heather wondered if she shouldn’t have brought up the topic.

Heather placed her make-up back inside her bag as Laura finished washing out her mouth. The two girls almost reached the doors of the bathroom before Laura found herself running back to the stall. As she sat choking over her empty stomach, tears began to fill her eyes. She couldn’t be pregnant, she told herself. Todd knew enough not to get her in that predicament. Surely he had held back. She felt ashamed for her naiveness. Sex had always embarrassed her, and she didn’t know as much as Heather did about it. That was one of the problems with a conservative raising. It was just the flu. They had only made love twice, and what were the odds?

Laura knew she had to confront Todd about her condition. He had a right to know. He would tell her that everything was all right, and that he knew enough not to get her pregnant, but

she feared the rejection which might occur. She didn't want to seem so inexperienced to him. The last few weeks had felt so good to her. She couldn't remember a point in her life where she felt as good, but as the days passed without any indication of her cycle ending, she had grown scared. She feared for her condition, but had a glitter of hope in her heart that it was just a false alarm.

Now she found that Heather was probably pregnant too. How could she keep her cool when she knew she was pregnant. Laura felt as if the whole world had come to a halt, waiting for her period to come. Laura looked down into the clear blue water in the bowl of the toilet. Three heaves of her stomach and nothing to show for it. She knew she would need to see a doctor soon, she couldn't keep anything down.

Saturday morning came before Laura realized, and she couldn't bare sitting home by herself in pity. She reached Heather's house and was told by Heather's father to go ahead up to Heather's room. Laura had little energy as she walked up the long flight of stairs.

Laura walked into Heather's bedroom. Her friend sat listening to records on the floor and didn't hear Laura come in. The cluttered room looked as if a tornado had gone through it and her clothes laid scattered across the floor. The bed still remained unmade and it smelled of stale air. Laura felt tempted to open a window.

Heather's room reflected her personality. Bright pinks and colorful floral patterns decorated the walls and bedding. The loud colors looked extremely girlish, and several elegant prints hung on the walls. The bright sun flooding in through the window glimmered over the shiny objects across the floor.

"Hello Heather," Laura spoke so as not to startle her friend.

Heather turned around from what she had in front of her to see who disturbed her solitude. A gentle smile filled her face as she recognized her good friend. Heather had not yet put on her make-up and her complexion had many imperfections. Only through her precision hairdressing and cosmetic application had she maintained her young beauty and reputation for details. Laura obtained a more natural beauty, able to step out of bed in the morning and look presentable.

"Hi Laura," replied Heather. "Sorry my room's such a mess. I wasn't expecting any visitors this early in the morning."

"What are you doing?" Laura asked, looking around at the pictures lying across the floor.

"Oh, I'm just throwing out some old photographs I don't need to keep around anymore. I just hold on to a few for memories, but toss out the ones I don't need anymore."

Laura noticed several pictures of Todd lying on the floor. The sight of him made her angry and happy at the same time. She had not seen Todd for several days and wanted

desperately to talk to him, but at the same time, she felt overcome by rage at the position he had placed her in. The turmoil brewing inside her grew rapidly, and she knew she could not even vent her anger to the one person she told everything. For the first time in her life, Laura had to keep her emotions locked inside her, knowing Heather and she could never discuss it.

“Why throw away all the pictures?” asked Laura, wishing she could take a few with her.

“No reason to dwell on the past,” replied Heather. “If I’m going to get on with my life, I need to put him behind me. What would I do if a guy came over to see me and I still had Todd’s picture on my night stand?”

“Wouldn’t you keep most of them for sentimental reasons?” Laura persisted.

“He’s a guy, Laura. If I held onto every picture of every guy I’ve gone out with, I wouldn’t have any space at all in here. It isn’t like there’s something really special about him.”

“But the two of you shared his first time together,” stressed Laura. “That’s something that nobody can ever get back after it’s been done. That’s something that only you can cherish. I thought he might have had more meaning than that.”

“Where did you get a crazy idea like that from?” asked Heather with a look of confusion. Laura realized that her friend found the prodding odd. She had to keep her cool, and didn’t want to give her secret romance away.

“I guess you’re right, I’m just a hopeless romantic. I shouldn’t have brought it up, I guess. I just thought something like that might mean something to you.”

“I didn’t mean the romantic side of our relationship was a crazy idea,” Heather corrected. “I just wondered where you got the idea that Todd was a virgin before I met him.”

“I thought you said he was inexperienced?”

“Maybe in the state of Iowa,” Heather continued. “But one thing Todd was not when I met him, was a virgin. He claimed he was at first, but after we had gone out for a while, I got the truth out of him.”

“What do you mean, the truth?” asked Laura, trying to hide her anger.

“It’s all part of the game.”

“What game?” Laura persisted.

“The game guys and girls play with one another to see how far they can get,” Heather clarified.

“Why would he do that?”

“Two reasons, I guess,” spoke Heather, trying to educate her friend. “First, innocence is an incredible turn on. Guys seem more tempting to a girl if they come across as not knowing much about sex. It makes it look more like they want to experience something special with you, something they don’t really understand. But it’s usually just a cover so they can get down your pants easier.”

“And secondly?” asked Laura, extremely upset.

“Well,” Heather continued. “Secondly, nobody wants people spreading rumors about their sex lives. They want to know that their partner can keep a secret. If you both claim total innocence and always keep it to yourself, then you can always trust that nobody will ever know. It’s the mutual fear of having your reputation ruined that allows you to trust one another.”

“So you’re supposed to keep everything a complete secret?”

“It’s almost like a special code of honor. You don’t tell people what goes on between you, even if you’ve broken up and are mortal enemies. It just gets to be too messy if you start throwing mud. When things are over between you, they’re completely over. You hold onto the memories, but you don’t share them with everybody.”

“So then Todd had been with another girl before you?” Laura pressured for an answer.

“Todd’s been with many girls,” Heather exclaimed. “He’s from California, that should tell you everything right there. Nobody from California is a virgin.”

“So did he tell you he was a virgin your first time together?” Laura continued to pry.

“No,” answered Heather. “He had this story about how he had only been with one other girl. He’s played the game before. He’s actually quite good at it. He even had me believing his story for the first few times, but the longer we went out, the more I realized he had a lot of experience.”

“How did you know that?”

“Some of the ideas he came up with,” she answered. “One day after we had done it, I made him tell me the truth. I started bragging about how many guys I had been with, and he couldn’t resist. He admitted that he knew many girls intimately.”

“He’s been with a lot of girls?” asked Laura in disgust.

“Yeah,” answered Heather, noticing her friend’s anger. “Like I said, he plays the game really well. He’s a really smooth talker. I bet he could talk just about any girl out of her clothes. Why the sudden interest in Todd?”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” apologized Laura. “I just had the idea from when you first started dating that he was really innocent. I can’t believe that he used a story like that just to get his way with a girl. What ever happened to honesty?”

“Honesty doesn’t get you laid.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you to tell me about your personal life,” Laura apologized again.

“Oh, I don’t mind talking about it,” Heather explained sincerely. “Now you’ve learned from my experience without having to make a mistake yourself. I mean, what are friends for if they can’t help you from making the same mistakes they did.”

“Yeah, that’s what friends are for.”

“So why are you up so bright and early, Laura?” Heather asked, changing the subject.

“I had another rude awakening. This stomach flu doesn’t seem to want to go away.”

“Maybe you should go see a doctor, you look really thin.”

Heather looked up at her friend with sincere worry. Laura wore a T-shirt and shorts, even with the cold weather outside. Her usual cheerful spirits had disappeared, and Heather knew she needed some rest.

“I don’t want to do that just yet. I’m sure it will go away soon. There’s no reason to bother a doctor about it yet.”

“You’re going on three weeks with this flu. Why don’t you get some medicine to kill it?”

“I don’t know,” Laura explained. “I guess I’m just afraid to go and find out what the treatment for my illness is. I really hate going to see doctors.”

“I know what you mean,” agreed Heather.

Laura and Heather stood along the side of the football field watching the clock slowly tick down to the final seconds of the game. The temperature felt incredibly warm for an evening at this time of year, and expectations for this final game were really high.

The crowd had remained standing through the entire game. Everyone knew that if they won tonight, they would still make the state tournament. The team had managed to pull together and win their past two games, and everything was riding on these last few plays.

Even Heather had her spunk back. The night seemed unreal, and in a way, Laura hoped the last few weeks were just one long dream. She fantasized about waking up and regaining her innocence that she had lost during the dream, but she knew everything was real.

Harrison’s football team lined up on the three yard line for the last play of the game. The score sat at 48 to 42, with Harrison needing the touchdown to win the game. Laura hoped that they would make it to the tournament. She wanted to talk seriously with Todd, but the football season had taken a turn for the better, and she didn’t want to affect his playing. She had excuses every time she had met with him really. Before the sudden change in the football season, she didn’t want to tell him while he felt so depressed and moody. Nobody expected this game to stay so close, and winning fell beyond the scope of miracles, but they had held their ground against the best team in the league.

Laura watched with shaky nerves as the home team hiked the ball. The quarterback took several steps back as a battle raged before him. Laura’s heart skipped a beat as she saw the quarterback hand Todd the ball and left everything up to him. She would deliver quite a weight for his shoulders to handle when she broke the news to him, but it seemed minuscule to what he carried at this moment.

Todd ran forward at full speed towards the dueling linemen. At the last moment, he found a hole in the defense and ran up through the line. He had the ball held high as he crossed the line and the nearest official called a touchdown.

Laura and Heather screamed as loudly as they could. For the first time in weeks, Laura had managed to keep her dinner down. Even the smell of cheap hot dogs in the air smelled good to her. Moments later, the kicker scored the extra point, and Harrison took the lead.

The stands roared in a frenzy as Laura looked up at the clock and noticed that five seconds still remained. The time it took to kick off the ball and run down the last five seconds seemed to last forever, but their opponents' attempts were in vain as Harrison tackled the runner where he caught the kick.

The group of blue and white football players danced around on the field as the final seconds ran down. The spectacle before her under the bright lights threw Laura into a momentary trance.

The crowd roared as the buzzer signaling the end of the game sounded. The bleachers emptied in a chaotic state as the student body and local supporters ran down to celebrate. Laura could hardly hold herself back from running down and throwing her arms around Todd. She ran out onto the field with Heather, wishing for a moment that she had never known her.

The two girls made their way through the crowd, not sure whom they were really looking for. Laura found Todd standing with several of the other players, he had a huge smile on his face. Laura had never seen him looking so happy. Todd noticed her, but quickly looked away.

Laura turned next to her and understood why. Heather had caught sight of him as well. The two girls stood there, not uttering a word. Laura began to feel awkward. She didn't care if anyone knew about her and Todd, yet something held her back.

She feared that maybe Heather was telling her the truth about Todd. Maybe he really was the experienced manipulator that Heather claimed, and he had lied to her. She felt terrified as she realized that it was possible that he had used her and tricked her into thinking he really cared for her.

The guys whom Todd stood with turned and started towards the school locker room. Their path led them directly past the two girls who stood silently waiting. Todd glanced at Laura only momentarily, but looked Heather over as he got closer to her.

"You played a good game, Todd," Heather complimented him.

"Thanks," Todd spoke quietly as he smiled at her.

Laura stood by, not uttering a sound. Her thoughts wandered rapidly, studying the entire situation over. Her fears began to eat away at her, and she knew she had to do something. She decided she would try to separate herself from Heather so that she could escape with Todd for a while and sit down and talk.

She had so much she needed to tell him, and there were several questions she wanted answered. She had to know how much, if any of their relationship was a lie. She started back off the field and towards the school with Heather walking by her side.

They reached the bleachers and Laura noticed Heather walking slowly over to sit down. The detour was unexpected, as the crowds had almost completely cleared the stands, and she knew something had gone wrong.

Laura walked over and sat down next to Heather on the cold wooden seat. She started to chatter about how much fun they would have when they went to cheer at the state tournament and asked Heather if she thought they had a chance of winning the state title.

Laura waited quietly for her friend's reply. Heather hadn't listened to a word she had said. She just sat in tears. Laura knew she felt some regrets for losing Todd.

"Are you all right, Heather," Laura asked.

"I didn't think I'd miss him this much. He hasn't even spoken to me since the homecoming game. Now, I hear around school that he's been seeing someone else. I know that it sounds funny, but I really want him back. I think I may have made a big mistake."

Laura felt her stomach tightening up. She wanted so badly to tell someone about her condition and she knew that Heather could relate to her. Laura hoped that her friend might finally have gotten over Todd and that she could come clean and ask her friend for advice, but now she realized that was not an option.

"You're right, Heather, you have to put him behind you now," Laura pleaded with her friend. "Why don't you try getting in touch with number 87. I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard. I'll even ride down there with you to look for him."

"I don't want him," Heather sobbed. "I was just using him to make Todd jealous. I had to get even with him. I never thought I would lose him over it. I have to get him back, Laura. Do you think he'll ever come back to me, Laura?"

"I wouldn't count on it, Heather. I heard he and his new girlfriend are pretty serious."

"Do you know who she is?" asked Heather.

"No," Laura answered without thinking. "I don't keep track of Todd's social life that closely."

"I'm gonna go home," uttered Heather. "I'm not much in the mood for celebrating right now. You don't mind if I ditch you, do you?"

"No," assured Laura, feeling awful. "Go home and get some rest. Give me a call if you need to talk."

Heather walked away from the bleachers and headed to her car. Laura remained in the bleachers for some time, watching the door where she knew Todd would exit. After about fifteen minutes, he walked out of the school building with several of his friends.

Laura knew she had to talk with him. She walked quickly to cut them off before they could leave the parking lot. Todd spotted her from far away and broke off from his friends towards his truck. The parking lot had almost emptied as the students headed to main street to celebrate.

“Hey there,” Todd called out as he got closer to her.

The two were far away from anyone else in the parking lot and Laura knew it was safe to talk to him. She fought to hold back the tears she wanted to cry.

“You really did great out there,” Laura answered as he reached out and threw his arms around her. Her troubles seemed to disappear when his arms were around her, but she knew her mind just masked them.

“Let’s go,” Todd pressed as he grabbed her hand and led her towards his truck. “I told the guys I would meet them in an hour or so to go party. We have to be finished before then.”

“Finished with what?” Laura asked.

“You know,” Todd smiled. “You can’t tell me your not as horny as I am right now. Let’s go, I’m all showered up.”

“I’m really not in the mood for that right now, Todd. Can we just go and talk for a while. I really need to speak to you, and I don’t think it can wait any longer.”

“We can talk,” Todd assured her, “but you have to understand, I need you right now. I’m in the celebrating mood, and you’re my girl. I want to kiss every inch of your body. This is a night to party.”

“Why don’t you go ahead with your friends,” Laura told him. “I really don’t feel well enough to do that tonight. I don’t want to spoil your fun with the guys. I’ll talk to you tomorrow when we can get some time together alone. You’re going to the dance, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Todd uttered disappointedly.

“I’ll call you tomorrow during the day if I start feeling any better,” Laura told him. “But if I can’t reach you, I’ll for sure see you at the dance. No matter what, before the day is over tomorrow, I want some time alone with you.”

Todd nodded his head and jumped into his truck. Laura walked back to her car alone. She heard his engine roar as he squealed the tires leaving the parking lot. She knew she had upset him, but couldn’t bring herself to think about sex when she had such important things on her mind.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered to herself. “Tomorrow we’ll talk.”

Chapter Five

The young girl sat in the examining room, waiting for her doctor. The pastel colors of the small, well-lit room felt comfortable, even with the odd odors of bandages and medicine. She wore only the gown given to her by the nurse. Her bottom crinkled the paper that lined the reclining bed in the center of the room. She could feel the breeze from a ceiling vent against her bare back. The doctor's office always made her feel nervous.

"Hello there, and how are you today," Dr. Drake called out in his commanding voice as he entered the room. He closed the door behind him and turned to face her with a warm smile. He had a white lab coat hanging loosely over the nice clothes he wore to work.

"Not bad, all things considered," she answered.

"I see your tests are back. You do know the results?"

"Yes, Dr. Drake, I haven't had a period in two months. My body runs like clockwork. Either I'm pregnant, or I've hit menopause."

"Considering your age, I would go with your first guess," remarked the doctor, writing down some notes on her file. He had taken a seat across from her, and his stethoscope hung over the paper as he crouched over to write on the small note board.

"I was afraid of that."

"Do you have any idea what you're going to do this time?"

"I can't go through with it," the girl stated without hesitation.

"What about the father, have you told him yet?"

"I can't. I'm not seeing him anymore. He wouldn't want anything to do with it anyway."

"Don't you think that should be his decision?" questioned the older man. He spoke calmly and quietly to the upset girl.

"It's my body. If he want's a child, let him get pregnant."

"Do you at least want to think about it?" Raymond asked.

"I can't have a child now. Why are you pressuring me like this? You never did before."

"This will be your third abortion," noted Dr. Drake. "You're a senior in high school. Don't you think maybe you should slow down a little bit. It isn't healthy to keep doing this to your body. I don't want to lecture you, I'm not your father. I just want you to understand what is happening from a physical standpoint.

"Every time you get pregnant, your body changes to harbor a child. When you abort the pregnancy, your body goes through a physical shock. You have to take it easier on your body. What happened to that prescription for birth control pills I gave you?"

“I took them at first, but it’s such a bother. After a while, I just forgot. I can’t remember to take them all the time.”

“So you want to have another abortion?”

“Yes. I know it isn’t good for me, but I can’t do this. I’m too young to have a baby right now. I want my children to have a father and a loving home to live in.”

“All right then. I’ll schedule the procedure for next week then.”

“Can’t we do it today?”

“I can’t today, Heather. I’m backed up on patients for the rest of the week. If you want somebody else to do it, I’ll understand. I just don’t have the time right now. Give me a week and I’ll squeeze you in.”

“You’re my doctor. If you need a week, it won’t kill me.”

“I’ll give the receptionist a time for next week,” answered Dr. Drake. “Let me leave you to get dressed. You can pick up an appointment reminder at the front desk when you leave. You know though, if you change your mind, I would love to show you the other side of pregnancy.”

“Someday I’ll come to you to have my babies, but not this time.”

“OK, Heather,” Dr. Drake uttered with a small smile as he left the room. Heather stood up and began dressing. She checked out with the receptionist and left the building for the ride back home. She felt a small cramp in her stomach as she walked out of the office into the cool afternoon air. She knew her body would return to its normal state in about a week.

Raymond Drake entered the door of his home quite late this evening. His wife quickly greeted him at the door with a warm smile and a welcoming kiss. The light outside had already subsided and his dinner had grown cold. Ray’s wife understood when he came home late like this. She never upset him with an argument regarding his dedication to his work.

“Good evening, Ray,” spoke Alice softly. “Do you want me to warm up dinner for you?”

“Sure dear,” Ray returned, “but could you give me a few minutes to make a phone call?”

“Sure, sweetheart. Who are you calling at this hour?”

“Just an old classmate from college. I might be a while, so why don’t you wait until I’m finished.”

“Is this the same man who came to visit you a few weeks ago?” questioned Alice.

“Yes,” answered Ray. “Edward Penn. I’ll make the call from the study. I don’t know how long I’ll be on the phone with him.”

“All right dear. I’ll be in the family room. Just come and get me when you’re ready to eat and I’ll come out and keep you company.”

“Thanks dear.”

Ray hung up his coat and walked down the hallway to his study. He turned on the light switch and walked over to his address book where he thumbed through the alphabetical listings. He sat back in the reclining chair behind his desk and dialed the number. He threw his feet up on the desk and began to unwind as the call went through.

The cold surface of the oak desktop numbed his legs. No matter how warm the house got, the desk always felt cool. He could still smell the furniture polish that Alice had used when cleaning his office earlier this day. The office was his lair of solitude in his home. He escaped here often to catch up with his thoughts. The dark decor of the room had a soothing effect on him.

“Hello,” answered the voice on the end of the line.

“Hello, is Dr. Penn at home please?”

“This is Edward Penn,” returned the voice.

“Edward, this is Ray. I’m calling about the proposal you gave me. I think I may have found a subject for you.”

“That’s great, Ray. I hoped you might come through on this one. Can you give me any information on the subject?”

“What do you need to know?” asked Ray.

“Anything of physical importance. The age of the fetus is my main concern. Information about the mother could be of some importance also. I need to start planning.”

“The mother believes she got pregnant about ten weeks ago. If anything, the fetus is younger than that. The mother is eighteen years old, and this will be her third abortion. I performed the first two and the babies were in fine health for the stage of development both times. I don’t think there will be any problems this time either.”

“When does she want the procedure performed, Ray?”

“Well, I threw her a slight curve today,” answered Raymond. “I usually perform the procedure on the spot, but I told her I’m backed up until next week. I realize you’ll need some time to set everything up and we need to plan how we’ll do everything. I don’t want anyone in my office to know what’s going on.”

“I understand, Ray. How about if I come up there tomorrow and take a look at things. My device is rather small. I can fit it inside my van. If there’s a back door to the clinic, I can get everything inside in less than three trips.”

“I don’t think there will be any problems. I scheduled the procedure during the other two doctors’ lunch break. The nurse would generally accompany me, but I can tell her that you’re in training and will be assisting me on the day we perform the procedure. I’ll need to see some of your work and know just what you will be doing to my patient. Her health is still my greatest concern.”

“I realize that, Ray,” Edward assured him. “I figure if we can put her out with some sedatives, then she won’t realize what we’re doing. The sedatives will also make the removal of the fetus a little bit less stressful on the child. Then your patient will have absolutely no recollection of the what occurred.”

“Why don’t you get your papers together so you can brief me on the procedure tomorrow when I show you around. When should I expect you to arrive, Edward?”

“I’ll be there by ten. Do you want me to come straight to the clinic?”

“Yes. I’ll schedule my appointments around our meeting to give us at least an hour to talk at my office.”

“Sounds good, Ray. I’ll see you then.”

Laura walked into the dimly lit gymnasium. The sound of soft music filled the room with its relaxing harmony. She had painstakingly prepared for tonight, taking her time with her make-up and wearing one of her favorite dresses. The soft, red colored dress fit her snugly, accenting her thin, but shapely, figure. For the first time in several weeks, Laura felt happy.

Tonight she planned to inform Todd of the news. After much time, she had finally built up enough confidence to tell him about her condition. She knew that this would involve many new changes in her life and that some of her plans would get put off for a while, but she felt confident with the decision she had made.

Laura walked through the dense crowd of people looking for a glimpse of Todd. The strong odor of a collage of fragrances gave the room a unique atmosphere. She made her way to the punch bowl and proceeded to fill herself a drink. The fruit punch refreshed her dry mouth and helped cool her off in the hot gymnasium. She turned around from the table to face the dance floor.

The song was now coming to a close as Laura searched across the floor for Todd. Many couples occupied the dance floor, taking advantage of the slow song to get closer to one another. Laura’s heart sank to a new low when she witnessed the sight before her.

Todd stood in the center of the floor with his arms wrapped tightly around Heather. The couple didn’t even notice when the song came to an end. Todd’s lips pressed hard against Heather’s and neither had their eyes open. Laura had not prepared for such a scene before her.

Heather also wore red to the dance. Her dress looked much brighter under the lights, and it covered much less of her body. Heather proudly displayed her long legs, covered with white nylons. The dress came down almost to mid thigh, leaving little to the imagination. Todd’s hands moved up and down her sides, caressing her.

As the couple released one another from their tight grasp, Heather locked eyes with Laura from the distance. A smile came across Heather’s face as she turned and excused herself from

Todd for a moment to speak with her good friend. Heather raced across the floor to where Laura stood, staring back at Todd from the distance.

As she came closer, Laura noticed the front of the dress, cut low and hanging loosely. The outfit made a definite impression, and Heather had the body to fill it. It was one of Heather's "fishing dresses," as she called them. She used them when she wanted to lure a certain guy in.

"Hi Laura, great news," yelled Heather as she gave Laura a big hug.

"Don't tell me, you and Todd are back together," Laura spoke. From the noise in the gym, Laura almost had to yell to speak to her friend who only stood inches away.

"How could you tell?" teased Heather sarcastically.

"I thought you said everything was over between you," questioned Laura in a harsh voice, still staring directly at Todd. Heather looked over to where Todd stood with a look of guilt across his face.

"Don't hold it against him for the way he treated me," defended Heather. "He was angry, and I was angry. I called him earlier this evening and we worked things out. I didn't realize how much I loved him until I almost lost him. I've learned my lesson though, I'll never let him go again. Please don't be upset with him. He's truly sorry for how he treated me too. He said he was just as lost without me. He wants us back together."

Laura still stared directly at Todd. Her face had taken on a deep redness of anger. Todd turned and looked away, while she wondered to herself what she had seen in him. Heather realized that something bothered Laura.

"What if I told you he had cheated on you while you were split up?" asked Laura, still with her eyes glued to Todd.

"I already know about it," responded Heather. Laura looked back at Heather with a frantic expression on her face. "He told me that he had gotten upset the night of homecoming game and gone off with some girl, but it's all right. He told me she meant nothing to him."

"Did he tell you who she was?" Laura asked in a shocked voice.

"It doesn't matter," Heather answered. "It's just a name, nothing that I need to hear. I can forgive him for what he did. I did the same thing he did. I think we both just needed that one last time of sexual freedom from one another.

"We've already talked it over and we know we want to spend the rest of our lives together. Now we just need to put the past behind us. Please, Laura, be happy for us. Don't be upset with Todd for what he did. Someday, when you have a relationship with a guy, you'll understand what we're going through."

Laura looked back at her friend, the anger still covered her face. A couple of guys approached the two girls and asked them if they would like to dance. Laura didn't even look over at them.

“No,” spoke Laura firmly as she grabbed her friend by the arm and drug her over to a corner for a little more privacy.

“How do you ever expect to get a date if you’re so rude to a guy when he asks you to dance?” scolded Heather.

“The last thing on my mind right now is worrying about getting a date with some loser.”

“Just what is your problem, Laura? You’ve been acting strange for the past few weeks now.”

“What are you going to do about the baby you’re carrying?” asked Laura, ignoring the question.

“Don’t worry about me,” pleaded Heather, feeling as if she understood the root of Laura’s emotions. “In a few days, that won’t be a worry of mine anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m having an abortion,” stated Heather. “What do you think I’m talking about. I can’t have this baby. What do you think Todd would do if he found out I was carrying number 87’s child. I know a doctor from some small town who will take care of everything.”

“You’re going to have an abortion?” Laura asked, obviously astonished by the new information.

“Sure I’m having an abortion. It’s not like this is the first time I’ve ever had one. It’s bound to happen if you never use any birth control.”

“I thought you said you would take care of this baby?”

“I am taking care of it,” Heather defended. “What did you think I meant, that I would raise it?”

“I can’t believe what you’re saying,” uttered Laura in disgust. “How can you live with yourself.” Laura stood for several moments looking her best friend up and down. “I really thought I knew you, Heather. Good-bye.”

Laura turned and walked away from the friend she had known since a little girl. Tears filled her eyes as she made her way to the exit. She ran out the door to the school parking lot in the direction of her car. It felt good to get out of the gymnasium and into the fresh air.

She ran into Todd before she could reach her vehicle. He had stepped outside to escape the situation, but his guilt got the best of him and he approached her before she could leave. He knew he had to finish things.

Todd stood between her and her car door. The tie he wore had flown over his shoulder as he ran, and he looked flustered. She could see dark patches where sweat collected on his white shirt. He had a hand held out to her, trying to get her to talk to him.

“I’m really sorry about this, Laura,” Todd began. “I didn’t know how deeply I felt for Heather. Please forgive me, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” responded Laura, almost yelling back at him. “You used me. I meant nothing to you. I thought you were different, Todd.”

“You know it wasn’t like that, Laura. It was special for me, but I can’t leave Heather right now, she needs me.”

“You’re a real creep, Todd. I can’t believe I allowed myself to see anything in a loser like you. You took advantage of me while you were in a slump. Now you’re the school hero and you’ve gotten your girl back. I guess I’m not good enough for you when you’re back on top of everything.”

“Don’t end it like this, Laura. What we had was special.”

“What we had was nothing. You’re not half the man it would take to satisfy my desires. I guess I should feel like I lost here, but I don’t. You’re the one who lost this time, Todd. It’s better this way, I could never have been satisfied, stuck with you. I look for intelligence in the guys I date. I hope you spend the rest of your life with her, because she’s just what you deserve.”

Laura pushed him away and climbed into her car, starting the engine. As she drove out of the parking lot, she saw Todd through the rearview mirror. He watched her disappear and stood there for a moment before hurrying back to Heather in the gymnasium.

The past few weeks had eaten away at her, and now she felt as if everything was lost. Her plans of an education and a prosperous life seemed to collapse before her. The idea of herself and Todd together had appealed to her, but she had wondered if he was truly the right guy to spend the rest of her life with. At least now she knew the answer. There was only one option left to her.

Laura drove around for a while, trying to build up enough confidence to confront the one man who still remained faithful to her. She knew the news would hurt him, but he was all that remained for her at this point. After some time, she drove up to the house and walked up to where he sat on the steps of his home.

“Hello Laura, how was your evening.”

“Dad, we need to talk...”

Heather sat back against the white paper of the surgery room recliner. The gown she wore failed to insulate her body heat, and she had goose bumps across her skin. Heather had her legs positioned in the stirrups of the bed and spread open to Dr. Drake’s view. Only the doctor’s eyes were visible from behind the operating gown and cap. The mask over his mouth hid his mustache from her sight. Heather felt extremely uncomfortable in this position.

“I’m going to administer a local anesthetic for the pain now Heather. Is the sedative I gave you taking effect yet?” he asked in a concerned and professional manner. The bright light above her shone in her eyes, making it hard to keep them open.

“I think so, I’m beginning to feel really faint,” she answered. Heather wanted to pass out, she didn’t want to witness the procedure. The room seemed extremely blurry to her and she felt as if she were floating on air.

Ray prepared the pan for the fetus while she continued to drift out of reality. After several minutes she had lost all consciousness. Ray walked away from the side of her bed and peeked outside the doors of the room. No loud voices extended from the empty waiting room up front. The building had an eerie quietness about it.

The nurse had gone to lunch and the receptionist knew not to come in the back during such a procedure. Everything looked clear for the procedure to begin. The back of the clinic had only one other occupant besides Ray and his patient.

Ray walked over to the bed and switched off the brakes. He wheeled the bed out of the room and pushed it directly across the hall to an identical room. Both white tiled rooms had a distinctive ammonia and rubbing alcohol odor, following sterilization. Stainless steel counters and operating trays reflected the bright lights in the ceilings.

Edward stood waiting in the other room. There were several monitors and a complex looking device made from an aquarium hooked up to a system of wires and hoses.

“Is everything set, Edward?” Ray asked with an eager voice.

“It looks good. Is she out of it?”

“Like a rock. I don’t think anything could wake her right now. You have about an hour before anyone returns from their lunches. Will that be enough time?”

“Once I make the incision, there’s only a few minutes before the child loses its oxygen stores. If I go over that time, you’ll have to finish the procedure you began. I shouldn’t need more than about fifteen minutes.”

Edward pulled out a swab and began washing the young girl’s legs and lower abdomen with a sterilizing solution. He pulled a large, reversible clamp out of a sterilized solution and began positioning it inside the birth canal. Ray stood behind his friend watching the procedure carefully.

Edward wore full surgical gown attire and a special light over his forehead. He pushed the clamp deep inside the woman’s birth canal until it reached her cervix. He slowly twisted the outside screws, opening the clamp. The device slowly enlarged the woman’s birth canal so that Edward could see clearly to the cervix. The clamp created a two inch diameter opening for Edward to work with.

“I’ve never seen an instrument like that?” Ray muttered over Edward’s shoulder.

“I designed it myself. It makes the procedure much easier.”

Edward pulled out a small laser and began forcing it towards the cervix. The laser contained a small optical device attached to a video monitor. Ray had never seen such

technologies before, and it fascinated him. Ray watched with wonder as Edward inserted another long device that opened the cervix slightly and placed pressure on the uterus, causing it to expand.

Edward flipped on a video screen hooked to the optical device. On the screen, Ray could clearly see the embryo inside the amniotic fluid. With the aid of several oddly shaped tools, Edward gently separated the sack from the uterine lining and pushed it to the side so he could see the placenta.

After the placenta came into full view, Edward began running several small catheters into tissue. Each catheter carried an ultra thin and durable tip which Edward gently placed into strategically chosen locations of the placenta. Once everything sat in its place, Edward pushed all the hoses to the side of the canal to clear an exit way for the embryo.

Edward glanced over his shoulder and asked Ray to begin the other devices that he had warmed up, waiting to go. Ray flipped the switches as asked and the series of pumps began running as the motors fired up. Edward took a deep breath and told Ray to start the clock.

Edward worked with incredible speed and precision, cutting the edge of the placenta away from the uterus and cauterizing the bleeding tissues behind him. Ray checked his watch occasionally, while admiring the skill and precision of his colleague.

In less than a minute, Edward had separated the entire placenta from the uterus and removed the laser. He quickly inserted a small set of forceps inside the opening. In only seconds he had collected the severed placenta and embryo inside the sack of protective fluid. He pulled out a hose and sprayed the inside of the birth canal with lubricant as he carefully removed the forceps from the woman's body.

Edward carefully lowered the embryo into the tank centered between himself and the patient's bed. The embryo came to rest on a soft membrane inside the tank and Edward wheeled the tank away from the bed of the woman.

Ray took over with another laser and stopped the bleeding inside the woman's uterus. The two worked simultaneously, Edward concentrating on attaching more hoses to the placenta of the uterus.

Edward watched the monitoring devices carefully as he injected several drugs into a special membrane serving the embryo. By the time Ray had finished with his patient, he turned and looked at the clock, noticing that the time had now passed.

"Did you make it in time?" Ray asked with excitement.

"The embryo is still responding," uttered Edward with pessimism. "The heart rate is slightly down, but I expected that to happen. The biggest test will be whether it can survive the shock in the change of environments. That could show up in a few minutes, or a few weeks," explained Edward.

“So the child is still alive?”

“Oh yes, in fact, that was my fastest time ever,” exclaimed Edward. “I’ve practiced on several models, but this was much simpler. How is the hemorrhaging in your patient?”

“It looks like we’ve stopped it,” answered Raymond. “These lasers are great.”

“They’ll change the face of medicine,” Edward agreed.

“Should I remove the clamps?”

“Yes, go ahead. Make sure you rinse well with the sterilized solution. The normal prescription for antibiotics that you give your patients should be fine. You can also prescribe something to aid in the expulsion of the uterine lining. She might experience a little pain from the stretching created by the clamp.”

“I’ll take care of any problems she might feel,” remarked Ray. “Right now, I need to clean her up and roll her back in the other room. Will you need anymore help here?”

Edward stared at his long time dream intently. He had not heard his colleague’s latter question. The sight of his device supporting the small life enveloped his every thought. He carefully monitored the embryo for any sudden problems while checking the catheters for leaks.

Ray gave the man his silence to work while he went forward and removed the clamps from his patient. He checked the hallway for any newcomers and wheeled the unconscious woman back to her original room. There he administered several more drugs including one to bring her slowly to consciousness and then returned to the room where Edward remained working.

“Well, Ed, is it successful?”

“Yeah, Ray,” answered the startled man. “It seems to have gone off without any problems.”

“So what do you do now, Edward?”

“I expect the placenta to begin deteriorating in a matter of days. The membranes will probably break down and stop functioning within a week. By that time, I’ll have her completely hooked up to the device. The only thing linking the child to the machine will be the umbilical cord. I’ll transfer the child to a larger tank when I get back home to my private lab, and that’s where she’ll finish her cycle of growth.”

“She’s a baby girl then?”

“It appears that way.”

“Will you need any more help?” Ray asked, looking the child over through the glass.

“I just need to seal up the tank to keep things sterile until I reach my lab. Then I’ll just need a hand taking the instruments back to my van and loading everything inside.”

“Isn’t the child going to be extremely susceptible to disease now?”

“She would be,” Edward began. “But I’ve collected antibodies from donors when I used to work with Dr. Evans. We used the technique all the time for premature children. I’ll just start administering the antibodies through my device. The child will be just fine.”

“Well, I’m going to clean up around here while you seal the tank. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Ray cleaned things throughout both of the rooms they had used. In less than ten minutes, Edward had everything ready to go in his van, parked at the back door of the clinic, and Ray helped him secure things down. Ray watched as Edward drove off down the road, hurrying to get back to his laboratory.

He returned to the room where Heather laid, slowly regaining her consciousness. He checked her vital signs over and made sure no new hemorrhaging had occurred. He glanced back at her face and noticed that her eyes were open.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” she answered. “And really tired. Is it gone?”

“Yeah, it’s removed. Would you like to take a look?” he asked, knowing what she would reply.

“No.”

“All right then,” he uttered quietly. “You get some rest. I need to keep you around for observations for a little while. You should be able to go home in a few hours.”

“Can’t I leave right now?” she asked.

“No,” Ray answered. “You had some heavy bleeding, and I gave you some pretty strong drugs. You need to wait for them to wear off. With your blood supply down, it will take some time. Is somebody waiting to take you home?”

“No.” she answered.

“I can’t let you drive all that way home until the drugs are completely worn off. Why don’t you just lay down and get some rest. It will take a while for you body to regain it’s strength.”

“I feel really sore.”

“Wait until you have to squeeze out a full sized baby,” Ray explained. “There’s always some soreness.”

Ray left his patient to let her get some rest. He walked to the back of the clinic where his office sat and began filling out her paperwork. He felt relieved that the event had passed. His stomach had bothered him all week worrying that something would go wrong.

Chapter Six

Margaret sat on the living room sofa, her head laid back, staring up at the ceiling. Her mom wasn't due home for several hours and she had the whole house to herself. Her thoughts wandered as they always did and she soon found herself in a deep trance.

The family portrait hung on the wall behind her. Looking back at the picture, her vision began to blur and the images grew hazy. Margaret noticed something as the images of her family melted together. She stood out like a sore thumb. The rest of her family had darker complexions and brown hair. Margaret, with her honey blonde hair and fair skin, looked nothing like anyone else in her family.

Margaret's thoughts drifted further and she found herself questioning whether she really was a blood relative, or if they had adopted her like an orphan. She had shrugged off the documents from her birth as a joke, but during the past few days, realized that joking around didn't fit her father's character. Now she questioned whether her parents had tried to cover up her true identity because they had adopted her.

Something else bothered Margaret as well, the encounter with Cheryl Penn at the mall and the fact that Edward Penn had actually existed once. She had never heard her parents talk about the Penns before. Now, with the legitimacy of Edward Penn proven, the chance that there were secrets in her past seemed much more possible. If her father had involved himself with Edward Penn in the past, she wanted to know how.

Margaret looked over at the clock, wondering if she dared to sneak through her father's files again. She had a large window of time before anyone would return home. Without any more thought, Margaret jumped up and started down the hallway to the study. In just a few minutes, she had opened up her file to examine it closer.

As she looked through the three papers carefully, she realized another interesting finding. All the other files contained medical records for the children and parents, but hers were missing. She started to wonder what the acronym L.S.A.U. stood for. She read the memo included with the file a second time, wondering what Dr. Penn practiced. She looked through the other files to see if her father kept any documents on the man, but found nothing.

Margaret sat back in the large reclining chair where her father so often sat. She spun around on the swivel chair looking the office over for any more information. Directly behind the desk, she found something she thought seemed odd. She had never paid much attention to anything in the office before, but this definitely stood out.

Her father had several file cabinets in his home office. Each had a label on the front indicating the contents of the drawer. The small file cabinet behind the desk had the label Research on it. Her father, however, had never done any research. His practice embodied the

majority of his time and she had never known of anything he had worked on as research. She decided to take a look.

Margaret searched through the desk for another key for this separate file cabinet. She located the lone key at the very back of the drawer, hidden from the others. She spun around in the chair and tried the key with definite success.

She pulled the drawer open and found it full of all sorts of files. At the front of the drawer sat a file label with the words “Life Sustaining Artificial Uterus (L.S.A.U.)” on it. Margaret felt boggled as she stared at the drawer of information, not knowing where to begin.

A series of laboratory notebooks, all similar to one another, sat at the front of the drawer. She picked out the first book and opened it up. It soon became clear to Margaret that this book was part of a volume of books written by Dr. Edward Penn. She finally felt as if she had found something substantial.

Each book had the title of the project listed under it and Edward had outlined the volumes and the information in each of the books. A separate book sat at the front and included a table of contents. This book contained an introduction to Edward’s work and explained the purpose of the study. Margaret sat back and read part of the introduction, skipping to the most interesting parts.

“...It is my belief that life is a gift from a higher power in the universe, which should be cherished and held dear. Throughout history, humankind has shown its disregard for this cherished gift through infinite wars and other destruction of human lives.

I have decided it is time for me to take a side in a silent war which has gone on for decades, a war which helpless children are unable to fight on their own. They wage a battle to fulfill the dream their maker had for them. I present this project as a weapon for those children to use in their constant battle for life.

It is my hope that this experiment might extend the boundaries of science and the human mind. I ask only that society look at this idea without prejudice towards the methods used during the experiment. I know that something as right as this is destined to succeed, and will work to make this dream a reality.

If but one human life might be saved through the use of what I study, then all my efforts will not be in vain. By understanding the developmental patterns of the human embryo and fetus, I hope that we might learn even more about the processes key to life. These findings might also aid in the research for increasing survival statistics for premature children. I feel that any advancements made in either of these areas are advancements made for all humankind.

The following books which I have written list the detailed findings of my research and the developments I have made in designing the first artificial uterus. It is specifically outlined for

review by all the fields of science and medicine and is aided with photographs whenever possible...”

Margaret set the book down beside her and dug through the other books before her. Most of the books contained technical data and information attained through the research of Dr. Penn. He presented the information in such a fashion that she could not understand much of what he had written.

Near the middle of the books, she encountered detailed diagrams and plans for a large chamber which could house unborn fetuses. There were also schematics showing the vast number of monitoring devices hooked up to the chamber and how he had connected everything.

The notebooks contained many pictures of the device as Dr. Penn assembled it. The more she read about the device, the more interested she became. Her thoughts intensified as she tried to figure out just how her father fit into the entire project, and how he had associated her with it.

She moved through the books quickly, searching for some tidbit of information describing her role in the project. She felt amazed to find pictures of a child hooked up to the device in later books. The child looked incredibly small in the pictures and extremely delicate. She moved quickly through these, trying to find out what role her father played in everything.

She located the last of the books in the volume and searched through it. About half way through the book, she found what she had set out after. The handwriting and the style of the journal changed considerably on the day that Margaret always considered her birthday. Her father had signed this particular entry. She skipped through the entry quickly, avoiding the technical information, and finally locating the heart of everything.

“I arrived at the home of Dr. Penn this afternoon with deep sadness and anticipation of what had become of his experiments. I found the subject to still be in very good condition. She is a beautiful baby girl and according to Dr. Penn’s notes, is close to the end of the development inside the chamber.

It was Edward’s life long dream to see this project to completion. I have now learned that even after seven months in the chamber, Edward has never shown the experiment and the child to his wife, who is now a widow.

Due to the terrible emotional struggle she has before her and the shock that would be endured if I were to bring this to her attention now, I will not tell Cheryl Penn about the child at this time. I will have to decide later how everything shall be handled.

I have read through much of the work that Edward performed during the past couple months and feel confident that I can separate the child from the device without much problem. I

will film the event as Edward had hoped so that the validity of what has happened need not be questioned.

I will be injecting several hormones into the blood stream of the child in order to initiate the procedure...

...The procedure appears to have gone over without any problems. The child began to cry and breathe on her own after several seconds. I have weighed the infant at 7 lbs. 2 ozs. This is slightly below average, but by all means a healthy baby.

She is over nineteen inches long and responding to all stimuli. I have placed drops in her eyes to protect them from extreme light and will now allow her to lie under the UV lamps, as she shows some signs of jaundice.

The child appears very active. She has very little hair and very beautiful features. She looks like a child that has just come from a Cesarean section, with no bruises or skull contraction. She enjoys the sound of her own voice and has been cooing lightly for the past ten minutes. Her temperature is normal and she has adjusted to her new environment very rapidly...

...I brought the child to my home to decide what course of action to take next. My fear at this time is that I know very little about the procedures that Edward performed and cannot at this time defend them. I realize it will take some time to read through all the work Edward has done and understand it well enough to present it.

I also fear for the condition of Edward's family, who are now enduring a great loss. I know the pressure that this would put on them to have the whole procedure brought public. For these reasons, I have decided to wait for some time before releasing any news of the procedure.

My wife and I have decided at this time to take the child into our family as one of our own. We will give the child the name Margaret and treat her the same as our other two children. During the time she is in my care, I will also study her growth and keep a detailed journal about observations regarding her mental and physical condition. I will attempt to keep as well documented of notes on her progress as Edward did while she was inside the growth chamber..."

Margaret sat down the book, overwhelmed by what she had just read. Her heart sank as she realized her whole life was just a lie. Everything she knew was fiction. The astonishment that filled her thoughts left her in a state of confusion. She sat for some time trying to figure out just what she could believe anymore.

The sound of a car door slamming shut brought her back from her trance. She peeked out the window to see her father walking up to the front door. Fear overcame Margaret as she looked

around at the mess she had made of his office. She fumbled through the mess, stuffing the books back into the drawer as quickly as she could.

She realized as she threw things back into the drawer that she had removed them in no particular order and that she couldn't replace them as she had found them. She did the best she could, slamming the drawer shut and locking it behind her. She swung around in the swivel chair and put the key to the drawer back where she had found it.

Margaret walked quietly to the study door and cracked it open to peak outside. Her father had hung up his coat and walked into the kitchen, out of view from the study. She closed the door behind her and scurried up to her room.

Margaret reached her room and shut the door behind her. She felt slightly sick to her stomach and she opened up a window for some fresh air. She sat looking outside for some time before she opened her closet and pulled out several books, searching for something to prove it all false.

She set down the first book and searched through it. This was her baby book, which her mom had prepared for her when she came into the world. She looked over the information on the first page. Her weight listed in her baby book matched the weight in the journals her father kept in the drawer. Questions about her true identity developed as she realized it was quite possible that what the books said were true.

Margaret ran downstairs to where her mother kept the family photo albums in a hall closet. She pulled out some of the old pictures and shifted through them, searching for pictures of her sister Helen at a young age.

She found the pictures without any problem. Her mother had always kept the pictures well organized and the family photo albums up to date. Everything looked in order and she soon found what she looked for.

Margaret pulled out the picture of her mother holding Helen for the camera. She read the date on the back of the picture and realized that her father had taken it only two months before her own birth. She flipped the picture back over and scanned it carefully. Her mother didn't look the least bit pregnant.

Margaret's head ran wild with thoughts of betrayal. She searched for pictures of her mother pregnant with Helen and soon found a similar picture of her mother holding her older brother. The date on the picture was three months before Helen's birth and her mother shown considerable signs of pregnancy.

Margaret's father sat in the kitchen eating a sandwich and unaware to Margaret's presence. She looked through the books until she found the first few pictures of herself in her mother's arms. She realized another interesting coincidence from the pictures. There were no

pictures of her with her mother in the hospital, yet there were pictures of her mother with both her brother and sister in the hospital when they were born.

Even the pictures of her and her brother and sister as infants looked nothing alike. Margaret felt an anger overcoming her as she began to accept that she wasn't her parent's own child.

She put the pictures back in the album and replaced the albums in the closet. Then, without speaking to her father, she walked out the front door of the house to take a drive. She started the car up with a roar and headed towards the canyon for some fresh air, Margaret needed to be alone.

Margaret sat beside the small creek, tossing stones into the water. Since she first discovered the small watering hole many years earlier, she always considered it her special place. She sometimes came and sat here for hours at a time watching the area around her.

The small creek usually had just a trickle of water running through it, but with the early spring thaw had a considerable amount more. It fought to keep the small pebbles which lined the bottom brightly polished and the water looked crystal clear.

The creek carved its way through a canyon cut by a glacier many thousands of years earlier. The canyon walls reached high above the small creek, but the glacier had cut a wide groove between them. Only the small stream remained to continue eroding the canyon bottom.

The watering hole was a favorite stop for many creatures which walked the small trails leading through the deep green pines which blanketed the canyon floor. Margaret often waited here patiently for a glimpse of the wildlife of the area.

Her special spot was a large, flat boulder which the glacier had deposited during its journey down the canyon. A large pine tree had grown beside the rock and its limbs spread out above the stone providing a large canopy which Margaret used to hide under.

The creek ran its course about forty feet away, and down a slight incline. If the wind blew in the right direction to hide her scent, she could sometimes go unnoticed by the animals as they ventured out from the forest to get a drink from the stream.

Margaret had discovered the spot while on one of her excursions from the family camping trip one summer afternoon. She spent the majority of her time that trip exploring the small canyon around the spot. She loved exploring new places. She never felt quite secure unless she had a good idea of what surrounded her.

Today's visit didn't involve any new exploring. She used it for one of its many other uses on this trip. She couldn't think of a better place to come and try to sort through her feelings. Here she could take all the time she needed to straighten things out.

Margaret's thoughts had bothered her for some time before her new discovery. The excitement of moving away from Deer Hollow came with a slight amount of fear and anxiety. She had many friends here and felt a special comfort in knowing that this was her town. Wherever she went from here, she became the outsider in somebody else's world.

Her emotions seemed unstable at this point in her life. She worried about college not meeting her expectations. She wanted to meet the perfect man at school and earn her diploma. She wanted to make her parents proud of her.

Everything seemed destroyed now. Her parents weren't who she had always thought they were. She resented them for lying to her all these years. As time passed, she felt more anger towards her parents. She just couldn't figure out why they would go on living this way for so many years.

Margaret sipped on the small cola she had picked up from the mini mart on her way out of town. An ice cold sensation ran through her as she swallowed the soft drink. The added chill of the mountain air mixed with the inner cold sensation and signaled her that it was time to start the hike back to her car.

The two mile hike would take her almost an hour and she wanted to get out of the mountain before it got too dark to see. She knew she still had plenty of time, but wanted to visit with her best friend Amy for a while.

Amy was the only person she could think of who could help her sort things out right now. The past hour she had spent alone had done little to relieve the betrayed feeling she carried with her. She knew that if anyone could help her calm down, Amy was the person.

Margaret smiled as she noticed the young deer venturing away from the confines of the heavy trees on the other side of the creek from her. It was the only creature she had seen on this trip. She knew if she waited she would see many more coming down for an evening drink from the creek.

On most of her trips out here, Margaret brought her camera with her for events such as this. She always enjoyed photography and loved taking nature shots. She had left her old 35mm camera back at her house today and thus just enjoyed the animal without the aid of film to document her sighting.

The deer lifted its nose high in the air, trying to decipher the unusual scent in the air. Margaret decided to help it out by climbing off the rock and stepping away from the tree in the animal's plain sight. The creature immediately locked its eyes on her and dashed back into the cover of the trees.

Margaret grabbed the empty cup that her soda came in and started down the mountain towards the bottom of the canyon. She hoped that the walk might help her unwind a bit.

Margaret imagined how wonderful it would feel to have Jeremy give her a neck rub right now. She paid little attention to her surroundings as she walked down the trail in deep thought.

Margaret parked her car along the curb outside Amy's home and shut off the vehicle. She stepped out of the warm car, feeling the coolness of the mid-spring evening. The air smelled sweet of blooming flowers and budding trees. The sweater she wore over her T-shirt kept her body comfortably warm. She always kept an old sweater in her car.

Margaret walked towards the front door of the house, but stopped when she heard the sounds of laughter coming from the backyard. She could clearly distinguish Amy's voice and decided to avoid knocking on the door and bothering anyone. She walked through the gate and around to the back of the house where Amy played with her dog.

Amy sat alone in the center of the backyard, the dog sat with its head in her lap. Neither the dog nor Amy had heard her as she walked towards them. Amy caught sight of her friend before Margaret made it across the yard and the dog jumped up and ran towards her at full speed.

Margaret stopped to catch the dog's front paws in her hands as he stood up and attempted to lick her face. The dog knew Margaret quite well and always greeted her this way. She knew the animal as well as Amy and he always welcomed her to his domain.

The sunset had already occurred and there were only a few minutes before darkness would blanket the small town. Amy's backyard appeared well cared for with a rose garden and several large fruit trees. The trees lost their glorious blooming colors with each minute of fading light, but it seemed apparent that this year would yield many bushels of fruit from the backyard.

Margaret looked over at her friend and tried to crack a smile. Amy wore her jeans and a sweatshirt and had her shoulder length dark hair pulled back in a French braid. Margaret had caught her taking a few moments to relax and enjoy the evening.

"Hey Margaret, what's going on?" asked Amy as the dog returned to her side and Margaret sat down on the grass beside her.

"I just needed somebody to talk to right now," answered Margaret. "Your mother called here earlier looking for you," Amy informed her. She could see Margaret shaking as she sat there and knew that something had upset her. "She said you had missed dinner and they hadn't heard from you. They seemed really worried about you."

"They aren't my parents," Margaret proclaimed. "They just took me in to study me. I'm some sort of research project."

"What are you talking about?"

"I went searching through my dad's papers again this afternoon. You know how my dad had that paper in my file that talked about Edward Penn. Well, we ran into his widow at the mall last weekend. It turns out that he died almost eighteen years ago."

The fact that he existed got me thinking that maybe the paper wasn't just a joke. I decided to snoop around a little more and see if there was anything more about him in my dad's files."

"Did you find something?" asked Amy.

"I found all sorts of books written by the guy. He was a doctor who studied premature births. My dad and he went to college together years ago. He was obsessed with trying to keep children alive outside the womb. I was just part of a project they were working on."

"What kind of project?" asked Amy.

"They removed a child from its mother after two months and kept it alive inside some device that Penn designed. I'm the child who was kept inside the chamber for the experiment. I don't have real parents."

Amy looked at her friend in disbelief. Margaret could tell that her friend didn't believe the story by the expression on her face. She looked down at her feet, trying to figure out how to prove it to Amy.

"I know it sounds strange," explained Margaret. "I couldn't believe it myself, but everything fits perfectly to the whole project. I looked at pictures of my mother, she was never pregnant with me. You have to believe me, Amy. My whole life is a lie. I need to find out the truth. You have to believe I'm telling you the truth."

"You aren't kidding, are you?" asked Amy.

"No, Amy. I've been hiding out the past few hours trying to figure things out. I hoped to figure out something small that would prove that it's impossible, but it all fits perfectly. It's too elaborate of an experiment for some little joke my dad thought up. They have all sorts of pictures of everything. I just don't understand why they did the work on me, and then why they kept it a secret from me all these years."

"Maybe you are your parents' child and they just removed you from your mother so they would have someone to do the research on," Amy suggested.

"No, my mother had no idea about me until my father brought me home after Edward Penn died."

"So you don't know anything about your parents then?" Amy asked.

"No," Margaret answered. "I just can't understand why they kept it from me all these years. I feel so betrayed. I'm trying to get my nerve up so I can go back and confront them about it."

"Don't be too hard on them, Margaret. A lot of parents don't ever tell their children that they're adopted. Adopted kids don't usually feel like they fit into a family and parents don't want them to feel that way. Your parents aren't that much different from a lot of other parents out there."

"But I wasn't even adopted."

“If I were you,” suggested Amy. “I wouldn’t let on that I knew anything. It sounds to me like all the answers you’re looking for are in your father’s files. If you confront them, they might try to hide things from you. Take it from me, sometimes if they don’t want you to know something, they’ll keep it from you as long as they can.

“You have all the answers right at your disposal. Don’t risk losing that opportunity.”

“I don’t want to go back there tonight. I can’t believe that they risked my life for scientific research. I feel like I’m nothing, just the product of some experiment. All these years that I worked so hard in school, trying to impress them, and they were just using me as a guinea pig.”

“Don’t look at it that way, Margaret,” pleaded Amy. “You have to give your parents some credit. I know a lot of kids that have terrible parents. I know your parents, they might be a little bit old-fashioned, but they’re great parents. Regardless of where you came from, they’ve been really good to you.

“Your dad’s a doctor, you’ve never been beaten, you can’t abandon them because you find one flaw. Don’t judge them until you know the truth. Maybe your real mother died and they removed you to try to save your life. If that’s the case, then your dad might have saved your life. You can’t be so hard on them until you know the truth about things.”

“If that was the case, why would they hide everything from me?”

“The answers lie in the files,” answered Amy. “Go home and make up some story about how you lost track of time. Act like nothing has changed, but don’t let it upset you so much. You’re parents have taken care of you for eighteen years. I think by now they plan to keep you. They’ve probably grown attached.”

Margaret smiled as she stared down at the dog licking her hands. The wet tongue covered her hands with fluid which quickly made them feel cold. She didn’t mind the animal’s show of affection. She didn’t even notice it over her thoughts.

Amy could make everything look positive, she could find good in everything, even a root canal. Margaret knew how lucky she was to have such a good friend.

“Hey Amy, who’s out there with you?” called a soft voice from the back door of the house.

“It’s just Margaret, mom,” Amy yelled back.

“Hi Margaret, have you been home lately? Your mother keeps calling, she’s worried sick.”

“I know, I’m on my way home now,” Margaret yelled back.

“Mom’s rather funny,” Amy whispered to her friend as her mother returned inside the house. She checks me every fifteen minutes whenever I’m in the backyard alone.

“She just worries about you,” Margaret answered.

“Just like your mom?” asked Amy.

“Yeah, just like my mom.”

Amy walked with her dog and Margaret to the front yard. Darkness had now crept over the town and the street light provided the only glimmer in the dusk sky. Margaret climbed in the car and rolled down the window as she started up the engine.

“Don’t worry, Margaret,” assured Amy. “We graduate in less than a week. We’ll have everything figured out by then. There’s no reason to ruin your graduation over something that happened eighteen years ago.”

“You’re a good friend, Amy.”

“Hey, friends help friends figure out these little secrets that have been kept from us all our lives.”

Margaret threw the car in gear and waved to her friend as she started down the road. Her mind worked frantically as she dreamed up a story to explain to her parents when she reached her home just a few blocks away. Anticipation and wonder about who her parents were and what had happened to Edward Penn started to eat away at her. She knew she would visit the books in her father’s study again.

While she drove, a new thought occurred to her. She had never imagined her father as a rebellious scientist. He always seemed so quiet and appropriate. This didn’t fit his personality at all, and she wondered what had happened to make him take part in this.

It had been several months since Dr. Raymond Drake helped Edward remove the child from its mother, and he hadn’t thought about it in days when he received the call. Ray sat in the examining room speaking with a young expecting mother. The young woman had only days left before she would deliver her child. She sat in her gown on the bed with her hands resting on the large mass that her stomach had become. He had finished the examination and was about to explain his findings to her when a knock at the door interrupted them.

Dr. Drake stood up and walked over to where one of his nurses peeped her head in. He recognized the importance of the message by the expression on her face.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Dr. Drake, but you have a phone call and I think you should take it,” whispered the young nurse.

“I’m sorry,” expressed Ray as he excused himself. “Why don’t you get dressed while I take this call and I’ll come right back to explain to you the changes going on at this point of your pregnancy. I’m terribly sorry for the interruption.”

Ray closed the door while the patient stood up and started to dress. The bright room seemed extremely lonely to the girl as she got ready by herself. The loose fitting blue gown felt

comfortable to her. It was the only item of clothing she had worn in the past three weeks which didn't squeeze her too tightly.

Dr. Drake walked away from the examining room and entered his office to pick up the phone. He removed the white lab coat before sitting down at his desk. The small room gave him plenty of privacy and solitude for the unexpected call. Raymond picked up the receiver and pressed the flashing button to connect the call.

"This is Dr. Drake."

"Hello Dr. Drake," spoke the voice on the other end. "My name is officer Frank Burlow. I'm a member of the state highway patrol."

"Yes officer, has someone been hurt?"

"Yes sir," answered the man. "He's an old acquaintance of yours. His wife asked me if I would call you, she's a little bit shaken up right now."

"Who's been injured?" questioned Ray, as a blanket of fear fell upon him and his mind raced frantically.

"I'm sorry sir," responded the officer. "The man's name is Dr. Edward Penn. He was pronounced dead at the hospital about two hours ago. I'm at his widow's home right now. She asked me to contact you regarding some business he left behind."

"Edward's dead? How did he die?"

"He died in a head-on collision this afternoon sir," answered the officer. "I'm sorry I have to break the news to you over the phone. His wife tells me you and Dr. Penn were good friends from college. We have a bit of a problem that we are wondering if you could clear up for us."

"What's the problem, officer?" asked Ray, still shocked by the unexpected news. He looked down at his watch, trying to get his thoughts straightened out.

"Dr. Penn's wife tells us that her husband was working on some delicate research. He's been doing the work in the privacy of his own basement. She says that you are the only other person who knows anything about what he was working with.

"All she can tell us is that the research was very sensitive and that it couldn't be left unattended for long periods of time. Mrs. Penn is extremely shaky right now, and we aren't sure what he may have been working with. We don't know if it's anything that might be dangerous or not."

Ray froze as reality settled back into his mind. He hadn't heard from Edward in almost a month and didn't know the status of Ed's work. He knew the implications of what the police might find. What was more important, he realized that Edward's family knew nothing about it.

“What have you found, officer?” questioned Ray. His fingers felt clammy as he tried to hold the phone in his trembling hands. Even in the cool, air-conditioned office, he could sense droplets of sweat sliding down his forehead from his own nervousness.

“We haven’t found anything yet, sir. Dr. Penn’s laboratory is in the basement of the home and the doors to the room are locked tightly. His wife has a key to the room, but has told us that nobody is supposed to enter the room until you are here. We don’t know what is in the room, but we wondered if you could find the time tomorrow to come down and look things over. I have the key in my possession at this time, but will turn it over to you as soon as you arrive.”

“I’ll be there in a couple of hours,” answered Ray quickly. He sensed a strange fear gnawing at his stomach, and felt a little queasy. He shifted through his appointment book as he talked to figure out how to cancel everything.

“It isn’t necessary that you come down right away. Mrs. Penn is extremely upset right now and she will probably have her immediate family with her most of the night.”

“I realize your situation, officer,” answered Ray, “but Dr. Penn’s work is extremely fragile. I need to come down and look things over immediately. I’m not sure what the status of his research is, but he poured a lifetime of work into it and I owe it to him to make sure his work is finished and not destroyed.”

“I understand, sir,” answered the officer. “I’ll be at the station house if you want to come pick the key up this afternoon. Should I maybe enter the room and check things over for you, sir? I know it’s a two hour drive from there, and if there is something that needs checked, I can do that for you over the phone.”

“I don’t think you’ll want to do that, officer,” answered Ray, thinking quickly. “Dr. Penn worked with unborn children, studying birth defects. I’m sure some of the things you will find could be quite graphic. You could also disturb the stability of the laboratory. It would be best for everyone if you wait and allow me to enter the room when I get there.”

“All right sir, and Dr. Drake, I’m truly sorry about Dr. Penn.”

“We all are, officer.”

Ray hung the phone up and walked to the front counter where his nurse sat at her desk. He felt surprised at his quick thinking under pressure from the officer. He had handled the situation calmly and protected himself and Edward from a possible catastrophe. Ray didn’t have time to mourn as he feared for his practice. He reached the counter with his hands still shaking, and walked up to the nurse. She saw him coming and sensed that something was wrong. His face looked as if he had seen a ghost.

“I have to go out of town immediately,” explained Ray.

“Is everything all right at home, doctor?” asked the nurse.

“Yes,” he continued. “An old friend of mine just died. I need to go to his home and take care of some things. Could you please answer any questions my patient has and ask the other doctors to cover for me. I only have two more appointments scheduled.”

“Sure doctor. Don’t you worry about anything here. I’ll take care of everything for you. You run along now.”

“Two quick things,” explained Ray. “The patient in the examining room only has a few days left. It could happen any time now. This is her first child and she isn’t very relaxed. I wanted to talk with her and comfort her a little bit. She has a lot of pressure on her right now.”

“I’ll talk with her,” assured the nurse. She admired his dedication to his work, but knew what needed done. She walked with him to the door as he left the building. “Don’t you worry about a thing. I can comfort any first time mother.”

“Also,” continued Ray. “Call my wife and tell her it was important that I hit the road right away. I’ll call her in a couple hours, once I get everything taken care of. I know it’s all quite sudden, but tell her I’ll explain when I get home.”

“You bet, doctor. I’ll call Mrs. Drake right away.”

“Thanks Mary, you’re an angel.”

Ray stepped into his car and looked at his watch, two thirty. He knew the trip would take over two hours. Ray had no idea of what had taken place with Edward’s research in the past month. He tried to add up the age of the fetus, but the time had slipped his mind. Then he remembered the young girl in his examining room.

She had come into his office around the same time as the mother who had chosen to abort her pregnancy. The two unborn children should have entered the same stages of pregnancy together, but Ray had no idea if the procedure had managed to work.

Ray had driven several miles before the reality of the situation really hit him. His old friend from college had died. He choked on the stagnant air in the car and rolled down the window to settle his stomach. He drove on as tears flowed freely from his eyes. He had so much he had wanted to say and so little that he really knew about his old friend anymore.

Ray reached the door of Edward’s house early in the afternoon and knocked lightly. He had picked up the key from the police station and told the officers he would call them if he needed any help. He had only met Cheryl Penn twice, one of the times at their wedding reception. He felt like a stranger as he waited at the doorstep. He hardly knew the woman.

An unfamiliar face greeted him at the door. Ray could see some resemblance in the features to his old friend Edward, but he didn’t know who she was. The woman didn’t seem to recognize him either.

“You must be one of Ed’s sisters,” Ray spoke in a tender voice.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’m afraid I don’t recall you.”

“I’m Raymond Drake. Ed and I were classmates in college. Mrs. Penn sent for me.”

“Oh yes,” the woman answered in an excited voice. “Cheryl’s been waiting for you. She’s really worried about what Ed’s been working on lately. I hope you can calm her down a bit.”

“Will you take me to her?”

The woman motioned him to follow her down the hallway. The house was crowded with close friends and relatives who had come to give their condolences. The smell of fresh baked breads, brought by neighbors to aid with the burden created by the loss, filled the air around him.

Ray saw several children as he walked down the hallway whom he recognized as Edward’s own. They looked old enough to understand what had happened, but too young to lose a father. A sadness overcame him before he could reach the room and his tears returned.

The woman led Ray to the master bedroom where the widow sat at her bed with a handkerchief. The drawn shades provided little light to brighten the dismal mood of the home, and it felt uncomfortably cool inside. Cheryl looked up at the two as they entered the room and immediately recognized Ray.

“Oh, Dr. Drake,” Cheryl cried out. “Thank you for coming so soon. Come with me to the study where we can talk.”

The woman stepped up from the bed and grabbed Ray by the hand. She didn’t look as Ray had expected after the recent visits from Edward. Edward looked so worn out and haggard, but she had a younger, vibrant appearance. Her long auburn hair and healthy skin made it hard for Ray to believe that she and Edward were the same age. The radiance which seemed to surround her looked only temporarily covered by a shadow of sadness.

She led him back down the hall and into an unoccupied room. Cheryl shut the door behind her as Ray walked over and stood by a bookshelf near the desk. Mrs. Penn walked over and leaned up against the desk. The small room provided a region of solitude in the busy, mourning atmosphere of the home.

“I’m sorry about your husband,” Ray began. “He was a good man.”

Ray could tell by the smeared make-up on her face that Cheryl had shed many tears already. His heart felt pity for her and he wanted to look strong so that he wouldn’t upset her. However, the sight of her before him made the lump in his throat harden and he had to fight to keep his composure.

“I know that,” she answered. “I love my husband very much and I can’t believe he’s gone. When they came to the door and told me the news, I just about lost it, but I made my husband a promise. I promised him if anything ever happened to him, that you would be the first person I contacted.”

“That must have seemed like an odd request,” uttered Ray.

“Not at all,” Cheryl explained. “My husband had two real loves in this world. I like to think that the first was his family. He cared deeply for it and fought to preserve it. I’ve never known a man so dedicated as Edward.

“His other love was his research. Edward never told me much about his research. He even designed his laboratory so that none of the kids or I could ever get inside. It never bothered me that he did this.

“I knew about some of the things he involved himself with. He didn’t keep the work from us because he didn’t want to share it with us, he wanted to protect us from it. I’m glad that he did this. I wouldn’t want my children exposed to the sight of unborn children.”

“I understand why your husband did this,” spoke Ray, amazed at the stability and emotional strength of the shaken woman. She had changed into a dark navy dress before the visitors arrived at the house and she acted rather strong. Her strength helped Ray hold back his tears as well.

“Anyway,” she continued. “Edward has been working heavily in his laboratory lately. He had just run out for a quick lunch when he got in the accident. I know that he was extremely excited about the work he was doing. He said he would be finished in a few more days.

“My husband poured his life into his work, and you are the only person who knows anything about it. I don’t want that work destroyed. I don’t know what he was up to down there, but I’m turning everything over to you. I know you’ll do the right thing with it.

“You have the only key to the laboratory. It’s down in the corner of the basement. I’ll make sure that nobody disturbs you while you’re there.”

“I haven’t kept up with Edward for a while now,” explained Ray. “So I’ll have to look around for a while and go through his papers. I might be down there for a little while.”

“Take your time, Ray. I know you’ll take care of everything.”

Raymond left the room and walked down the hallway to the basement stairs. It seemed that the number of people in the house had doubled while he talked with Edward’s widow. The people thinned as he came nearer to the room at the bottom of the house. The house looked empty down here as Ray inserted the key into the lock on the door. He waited a moment to collect himself as he turned the key and slid the door open.

Ray reached for a light switch and flipped it up. At first, the light didn’t come on, but it slowly warmed up with a soft blue glimmer. Ray entered the room and locked the door carefully behind him. The light reached a very weak peak and remained rather dim, adding just a sparse amount of color to the room. Overall, he could see to get around, but the room had no bright lights inside at all.

Ray looked over the technical instruments throughout the room. Along the wall sat several special monitors, including a fetal heart monitor. The low humming of motors from various pumps created a constant harmony, and Ray could read the pressures on the gauges connected to each pump.

There was also a large bench top with what looked like a huge fishtank sitting on it. A heavy cover blanketed the container and Ray knew immediately that he had located the artificial womb. All the wires and hoses flowed beneath the cover.

Several digital monitors next to the device measured the temperature and pH of the solution inside. A shelf nearby held a variety of small jars labeled as different chemicals. The room had a familiar hospital sort of odor about it and a carefully controlled internal heating device that kept it comfortable. An open logbook sat before the device and Ray sat down to look it over.

“... Friday, July 12, 1976, 700 a.m.

Only three days until separation of the infant from the artificial womb. The child seems to be responding very well, but sometimes kicks the glass of the tank. There appears no stimuli to force itself into labor. This has been a concern of mine.

Heart rate remains the same and the infant still seems very active for a third trimester child. I try to keep the tank covered as much as possible. She opens her eyes often and looks around at things. I sometimes worry that this might cause problems for her and it's outside my field of study to allow her to do this.

I'm confident that there will be no problems with the separation from the artificial womb. I want to keep the child in the device until it reaches its original due date. This will assure the scientific community that this is completely feasible and didn't fail towards the end of the pregnancy.

I'll give Ray a call this evening, and ask him if he would like to come down to aid me in the removal of the child, and to witness the event. I will also film the event...”

Ray looked over at the heart monitor and noticed it still recorded a heartbeat. He stared at the cover over the tank for a long time before he could bring himself to remove it. The anticipation overwhelmed him, but the fear of what he might find made him hold back. He finally set the cover to the side of the bench top and looked inside the device.

Ray had delivered many children during his lifetime. He couldn't count the number of Cesarean sections he had performed. He had seen many children under many circumstances at this stage of pregnancy, but nothing had prepared him for the sight before him.

The child looked extremely healthy to Ray. Edward had filled the tank with liquid, probably something similar to amniotic fluid. A large foam pad covered the top of the tank and kept the infant from floating to the surface and coming into contact with the air.

The infant floated against the pad high above the bottom of the tank. The child held her eyes open, staring directly back at Ray. Ray stared in astonishment for several seconds before cracking a smile. “The mad genius actually did it,” Ray whispered aloud to himself.

Ray continued to watch the child moving around in her environment. She reached her arms out several times at the light. A special net several inches from the glass kept the child from bumping against the outside structure.

Edward had pulled the net tightly and designed the structure in a fashion making it impossible for the infant to become strangled inside. The child seemed rather familiar with the structure as it kicked around the tank and moved over towards the light.

Ray remained entranced by the sight of the child. Edward had fused the child’s umbilical cord to the artificial placenta of the device. A series of tubes and wires came out of the placenta at the top of the tank and separated out into a maze of machines and instruments.

The instruments did everything from dialysis to adding oxygen to the infant’s blood. Ray had worked with many of the instruments before, but hadn’t ever seen a setup as complex as this before. He recalled how Edward only brought several instruments and a smaller sized tank to the clinic when they had removed the child from its mother. Here before him now, it all looked much more complex.

Ray watched in wonder for some time before replacing the cover over top of the device. As he sat thinking about what he had just witnessed, he noticed a light and constant thumping sound, almost like a blown speaker.

He followed the sound with his ear until he located the stereo that sat beside him on the desktop. Ray laughed as he realized the reasoning behind it.

Edward had designed a small electric device to simulate the sound of a human heart. Ray turned on the stereo and found the light sounds of symphony playing at a low volume. The peacefulness of the music calmed Ray as he considered his options.

Ray found the telephone on a bench top behind him and dialed home to his wife. A frenzy of thoughts filled his head as he tried to find the words to explain the situation to his wife. When the call connected, he found himself still speechless.

“Hello,” answered the tender voice of his wife on the end of the line.

“Hello dear, this is Ray.”

“Ray,” exclaimed the worried woman. “What happened, where are you? Mary said somebody died.”

“Yes dear, Edward Penn died this afternoon.”

“Really? What happened to him, Ray?”

“He was killed in a car accident.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

“I know dear,” spoke Ray. “Believe me, you couldn’t be as shocked as I was to hear it. You’re probably wondering why I drove down here right after I found out.”

“It did cross my mind, Ray,” Alice confessed. “I know you were really good friends in college and that you saw him just a few months ago, but it doesn’t make sense to drive out there all of a sudden like this. You hardly even know his family.”

“There’s a lot more to it than just that,” explained Ray. “I just wanted to let you know that everything’s all right. We’ll have to sit down and have a serious talk when I get home tonight, Alice.”

“Is something wrong, Ray?”

“It’s a really long story, Alice. I promise I’ll tell you everything when I get home tonight.”

“All right, Ray.”

“Alice, I really love you. You know me better than anyone and I like to think I know you better than anyone. Prepare yourself for a big shock. As soon as I can get everything tied up here, I’ll come right home. It might be a little while. I’m really going to need your support on this one.”

“About how long, Ray?”

“I have to read through some of Edward’s books before I can do anything and I have to do it right away, a child’s life depends on it.”

“Take your time, Ray, I’ll still be here waiting for you.”

“I love you, Alice, you know that.”

“I know, Ray,” she replied in a soft and calming voice. “I know.”

Ray hung up the phone and began searching through the library of books Edward had in the small laboratory. Ray turned on a reading lamp and sat down to go through it.

Ray walked up the stairs of the house many hours later. The number of people in the house had dwindled considerably. Ray recognized the sister who had opened the door for him. She sat with Cheryl all alone in the living room. Cheryl looked up with intrigue at her husband’s old friend.

“Was everything all right, Ray?” she asked in a concerned tone.

“Everything is just fine, Cheryl. Your husband’s work is still in excellent condition.”

“Wonderful,” she uttered with a sigh of relief. “You were down there for so long, I was beginning to worry. I don’t want his final dream to be destroyed.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mrs. Penn. Everything will be just fine. I’ll need to remove some of his books tonight. I’ll take some of the equipment home with me this evening. It might take several months before I can write things up to be published. I’m working with only a little bit more knowledge on the subject than you have.”

“That’s fine, Ray,” Cheryl assured him. “My only worry was that something might go wrong to destroy his dream. Edward kept much of his work to himself. I know you don’t have an easy task ahead of you. I’m going to get some rest now. If you would like, I can get some of the neighbors to help you move things out of the laboratory.”

“That won’t be necessary. I need to keep things as sterile down there as possible. I’ll have to come back again next week to pick up the rest of the equipment he has down there.”

“Come back at your convenience, or I’ll just see you at the funeral.”

“We’ll be there, Cheryl.”

“Well, I’m going to help her get to sleep,” muttered the sister who had remained silent until now. “Excuse us please.”

Ray watched the two women walk down the hallway to the master bedroom and disappear inside. He looked around the house to make sure that everything was clear. A clock on the wall read 230 and he knew he wouldn’t reach home before five.

Ray walked back down to the laboratory and washed his hands thoroughly in the sink. He had found the sterilized gloves which Edward used to work in the tank and the device to cut the umbilical cord. He prepared himself to begin the procedure, confident since reading through what Edward had written about the procedure.

Ray adjusted the various instruments to the settings Edward had listed in his literature. He found the drugs that Edward felt needed to be administered into the child and injected them into the lines leading to the cord.

Overall, the procedure went quite well. Within minutes, Ray held the child high above the tank and had clamped the cord. The child gave out several small cries as she began breathing on her own. Ray washed her off with sterilized gauze and wrapped her in a warm blanket and a diaper. He cut the cord behind the clamp and set the child in the small incubator sitting to the side of the instruments.

The child responded well to her new environment, looking around the room with a new curiosity. Ray placed several drops in each eye to protect them from the light and injected her with some vitamin K. He began administering some food through a bottle to the child and soon found himself changing the diaper on the baby’s bottom.

Within an hour of the procedure, Ray had removed all the books and equipment he would need for the first few days for the child, and placed them in the trunk of his car. He set up his child’s car seat in the front of the car where he could watch the child and packed her tightly

inside. The warm night air and the solitude supplied him with an opportune moment and he left the house without alerting anyone as to what had just happened.

As Ray began the trip home, he turned on some music for the child that sat next to him staring back. The child seemed remarkably quiet and calm. He knew that the child had experienced one of the least stressful deliveries possible and probably experienced no pain right now. Ray also noticed a strange feeling coming over him. He felt quite close to this child right now, almost like a father.

Chapter Seven

Margaret stopped her car in the driveway and gave the house a long look. She lived in a large home, and there were many rooms. Most of the windows looked dark this late, except for the living room. Her parents were there, probably waiting for her. She knew she had a lecture in her immediate future.

Margaret walked into the quiet house and prepared to face her parents. She didn't know how she would react, now that she knew what she did about them. They sat on separate sofas, waiting for her arrival as she walked towards the kitchen. That wasn't a good sign. Usually if they sat on separate sofas, it meant the lecture would take a while. They looked up at her and she knew immediately that she had upset them.

"Where have you been?" asked her mother. "You've worried us sick."

"I went for a drive on the mountainside to think things over for a while," Margaret answered. "I was sitting home this afternoon, and got thinking about how I'll be leaving home soon, and I guess I just got a little bit scared. I've never been on my own before and I'm worried about how I'll do in college. I guess it just hit me all of a sudden this afternoon, and I wanted to run away for a while to get some fresh air."

The level of her mother's anger decreased drastically, but Margaret could tell that she remained upset. Her father sat quietly, allowing her mother to take charge of the scolding. He sat beside the soft reading lamp and held a book in his hands which he had used to pass the time while they waited for her return.

"You could have left us a note, Margaret," her mother replied. "I know how you're feeling. They call this the senior blues. It's hard to accept that your whole world is going to change."

"Many of your friends from school you might never see again, but that's all right, you'll go to college and meet new friends. People don't realize what a change it is to finish high school, but you don't need to worry, this will always be your home. Some things you can always come back to."

"If things don't go as well as you hope and you need some time to yourself to get on your feet again, your father and I will always be here for you. We haven't raised you all these years just to get rid of you."

"I know, mom," Margaret answered, "and I'm sorry I didn't leave you a note. I just panicked and wanted to go someplace where I could clear my mind. I guess I fell asleep day dreaming."

“Well come on into the kitchen, I’ll warm up your dinner for you,” her mother suggested. “Why don’t you come join us, Ray. We won’t have a whole lot more of these family dinners left to enjoy.”

Margaret walked into the kitchen, followed by her mother. She removed her sweater so she wouldn’t sweat in the well heated home. Her parents had developed a sensitivity to cold as they grew older and they kept the house unusually warm. Margaret often cracked her window, even in the winters, to keep her room cooled off.

Her father sat in the living room finishing what he read. He assured his wife that he would join them as soon as he had finished. Margaret sat down while her mother removed a plate from the refrigerator and placed it in the microwave.

Margaret sat at the table, relieved that her parents had bought the story. She felt much better than she had thought she would after their conversation. It amazed her that her fictitious story could bring about such an honest and reassuring welcome at her home, and she almost felt guilty for lying to them. Of course, she still didn’t know if they had lied to her.

Margaret had never worried about leaving home. She longed to break free and experience the world on her own, but their talk reassured her that her parents cared deeply for her. This she could not deny.

The sense of belonging to the family made Margaret again wonder about the project and its validity. She had never known her mother to tell an all out lie to anyone’s face. She decided she would test her mother in a face to face conversation.

“We saw a movie in Biology today on giving birth. It looked really gross,” uttered Margaret from her seat at the table. The smell of her dinner coming from the oven reminded her that she hadn’t eaten in many hours.

“Birth is a beautiful event, Margaret. It’s a lot different when you see it live,” spoke her mother with sincerity.

“I don’t know, it looks really painful. I would be scared to death.”

“Is this conversation supposed to be leading somewhere, Margaret?” questioned her mother with a look of fear on her face.

“Oh no, mother, don’t worry, I’m not pregnant. The movie just got me thinking about things. Seeing a child separated from it’s mother and taking its first breath on its own is incredible. It made me wonder what it would be like to leave home. You’ve never talked about any of your births. I was just wondering if it was as painful as it looked?”

“Oh, there’s pain involved, dear,” assured her mother with a look of honesty. “The pain is indescribable, but the reward makes it all worth it. In time, the pain goes away, but that child is always there, and it’s a part of you, no matter what.”

“Was my delivery a very painful one?” Margaret asked, looking directly at her mother.

“Well, as your father can tell you dear, the more children you have, the easier the deliveries. There’s always a chance for some problem to arise which might complicate things, but usually, the last child is the easiest delivery you have. Your time in labor generally decreases with each pregnancy.”

“So then, my birth wasn’t as hard as Frank or Helen’s?” Margaret asked.

“I can honestly say that for me, you were the easiest birth of any of my children.”

“Did my labor last very long?”

“Your labor went so fast, I couldn’t even keep track of the time it took before you were in my arms.”

Margaret smiled up at her mother as she walked over and set the plate down in front of her. She realized her mother still couldn’t tell a lie, but she knew how to answer a question just enough to please the person asking it.

Her mother sat down with a glass of milk across from her, and her father soon joined them from the living room. The three chatted about the upcoming graduation and enjoyed the rest of their evening together. As Margaret talked with them, she tried to imagine her mother taking part in something of this nature. It was hard enough imagining her father as a radical scientist, but her mother doing the same was incomprehensible. Her mother had always taught her the difference between wrong and right. Margaret wished she could know if her mother had taken part in the experiment from the beginning, and what her involvement was.

Alice sat in the living room reading a book when Ray finally entered the house early in the morning. She looked at her watch, noticing the night had already passed. Alice had grown used to Ray’s work taking him away from her at all hours of the night.

Alice had grown tired some time earlier, but forced herself to stay up throughout the night. She could tell by her husband’s voice that something had upset him, and she wanted to see him as soon as he arrived home. The sound of the front door opening disturbed the silence that had surrounded her throughout the evening.

She set the book down next to her tea and waited for him to come down the hall. Ray noticed her at the end of the hallway sitting on the couch in one of her soft, warm robes. He could tell by the book in her hands and the reading lamp that she had stayed up through the night. He regretted not letting her get some sleep during the night, but felt relieved that they could sit down and talk now.

Ray walked into the living room carrying the small bundle in his arms. The light from the small lamp didn’t allow Alice to see him clearly until he stood right above her. Her mouth fell open as she saw the child in his arms.

“Is it Edward’s child?” she asked.

“It’s kind of both Edward’s and mine,” Ray answered in a soft voice, a gentle smile came over his face.

“I’m really confused here, Ray. Where did you get this child?”

“This child’s mother chose to abort her when she was only three months into the pregnancy. Edward transplanted the fetus into an artificial uterus that he designed.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, Alice,” Ray assured her. He could smell the strong odor of the tea she drank and wanted a glass for himself. The long night had taken its toll on his body. “When Edward first presented me with the concept, I couldn’t believe it either, but I have all the documentation out in my car.

“I didn’t really believe he could do it, but he’s been doing research on this for years. When the professor he worked for died, he started building the device. He came to me asking if I would help him in the research.”

“You helped him do this?” asked Alice, still staring in disbelief. She reached up and cradled the child which Ray handed to her. She sat on the couch and cuddled it for several seconds before she looked up at her husband. He seemed drawn back, and looked ashamed, though she couldn’t understand why.

“I know it sounds odd, Alice. Edward and I were deeply against abortions in college. When I went through medical school, I never thought I would have to perform one, but when I got out here, I realized it was something I would have to do in order to get my practice going.

“I would do almost anything to find an alternative to performing abortions. This was a radical answer to the problem, and nobody would ever buy into the idea.”

“Why have you kept it a secret from me all this time?”

“I didn’t want you knowing I performed abortions.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” explained Alice. “I’ve always known about the abortions. Ever since the first one you performed. I’ve heard you crying in the den late at night.

“I’m your wife, Ray. You can’t hide things like that from me. It’s written all over your face. What I meant was, why didn’t you tell me about what you and Edward were doing?”

“Do you realize what this could do to my career right now, Alice?”

“No, Ray, what could it do?”

“This isn’t the way that this kind of research is to be performed. All the research has to go through all sorts of reviews by scientists from across the world before such a procedure is attempted. It has to first be tried and proven effective on animals. Edward didn’t want to do that.”

“Why not, Ray?” asked Alice. “You know how they would have reacted, why couldn’t you talk him into going through the right channels?”

“Because I have to live with myself every time I perform an abortion, abortions on children just like the one you’re cradling in your arms. Look at that child and imagine trying to live with that. I know what we did sounds crazy, but somehow, the idea of this really appealed to me. I wanted it to happen really bad.”

Alice smiled back at her husband. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at the child in her arms. “She really is an adorable child, Ray. I’m sorry I’ve never been here for you to talk to about the abortions. I didn’t think you would want to talk about it, but I should have supported you better. I know it must put a lot of stress on you.”

“I’m lost now, Alice,” Ray uttered in a hopeless voice. “I have absolutely no idea what to do. I studied Edward’s books long enough to figure out how to remove the child from the artificial uterus, but most of it is way over my head. I snuck the child out of the house while everyone was sleeping. Now I’m not sure what I should do.”

“What will Edward’s wife say when she finds the child missing?” “She doesn’t even know about the baby,” Ray explained. “Edward knew what he was doing was wrong and he didn’t want his family wrapped up in it all. She has absolutely no idea what he was doing.”

“So what did Edward plan to do when the child was taken out of the artificial uterus?” questioned Alice. “Surely you two had a plan.”

“Sure we did, Alice. We were going to come out publicly with it, once we had shown that the procedure could be done without harm to the mother of the child, but that was when Edward was still around.

“He designed the device and could defend everything to the scientific community. I was just there to supply the child. I hadn’t even heard from him in over a month now. I was just supposed to be there to back up his claims and his scientific reputation when everyone freaked out. Do you realize what this could do?”

“So why don’t you go forward with it now?” asked Alice.

“I just told you why, Alice. I don’t know the first thing about Edward’s research. He has volumes of books in his laboratory. He’s worked for ten years coming up with everything for the device. People would think I was a fraud and a kidnapper.

“I would get torn apart if I came forward with this now. I can’t do that at this point in time. It will take me years to figure out the concepts of his device to defend it to the public.”

“What does the baby’s mother think about all this?”

Ray remained silent to his wife’s question. He sat staring at the child held in his wife’s arms. The child had her eyes open, looking back at the woman. Alice waited for an answer.

“Tell me you didn’t, Ray,” uttered Alice after some time.

“She chose to abort her child. Once the child is removed from her body, it becomes my property and mine to choose what to do with.”

“How did you do all this without her knowing about it?”

“Edward and I sedated her. He had the procedure down to a matter of minutes. As far as she knows, the child was destroyed during the procedure.”

“So let’s see if I have this straight now, Ray,” replied Alice in a bewildered tone. “You and Edward sedated a young girl who had chosen to have an abortion, and surgically removed the child without her knowing about it. Edward then took the child to his home and hooked it up to an artificial uterus he designed without ever telling his wife about it. Edward is dead and you have a perfectly healthy child which I am holding right now, that has come out of all this, correct?”

“Exactly.”

Alice glanced back at her husband with a smile. “She’s a darling child, Ray. I think I’ll keep her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want to keep her, Ray. It’s the only way. We can’t just give her away to somebody. This child was never legally born.”

“I made a promise to Edward’s widow,” explained Ray. “I told her I would finish up Ed’s research for him. The work is done. It might take me years to understand it well enough that I can publish his findings to the scientific community. I promised her I would do that. What kind of impact would it have on this child to raise her if she knows about all this?”

“Who said we have to tell her?” asked his wife. “Up until right now, her entire life has been a lie. One more won’t hurt her. Look at our family, Ray. Frank is only three years old. If he woke up tomorrow with a new little sister, he would never question it.

“All we have to do is convince our friends and neighbors that we adopted her and don’t want any of our other children to know about it. My family won’t be upset if I told them we found a child that needed adopting and decided to go ahead and adopt. I know your family would love the idea. You’re a doctor, Ray. You can fake a birth certificate. I want to keep this child, Ray.”

“You realize what you’re saying, Alice. You’ll have three really young children to deal with in the house. Are you willing to accept that kind of responsibility?”

“I know we can handle it financially, and I’m willing to accept her as one of my own children if you are. Besides, Ray, it isn’t like you have any choice. What are you going to do, leave her on somebody’s doorstep?”

“When the time is right and she’s old enough to understand what we’ve done here tonight, we’ll tell her. Until then, you can study Edward’s work and begin preparing it for publication. You can keep your promise and we’ll offer her a stable home where she can grow up with our family.”

“So what do we do now then?” asked Ray.

“Has she been fed yet?”

“Edward had some glucose solution made up for her that I fed her right after I removed her from the device. She slept all the way home in the car, so she hasn’t ate in over two hours.”

“Can I nurse her, Ray?”

“Sure dear. It would probably help her considerably to get some of the immunities that you’ve built up through your milk. Will you have enough milk for Helen though?”

“I’ve been cutting Helen back substantially. She can survive on a bottle now. Once my body realizes I’m feeding more, it will produce more milk. I should have plenty for this little one.”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Alice. I knew you would have all the answers. You always seem to solve the little problems I get myself wrapped up into.”

“This is hardly a problem and far from a mistake,” defended Alice. “I believe God has had a pretty big hand in all of this. This device that Edward designed could save thousands of lives for families such as ours, that want children.

“I will never understand how anyone can look at a child as beautiful as this, and call it a mistake. She’s a little angel, Ray. Start bringing the rest of the stuff in from the car. I’ll go set something up for her to sleep in tonight.”

“I’ll have to go back up to Edward’s house next week and get the rest of the stuff from his laboratory. I don’t want the device to run the risk of being taken apart. I’ll rent a storage shed to store the equipment in until I feel it can be operated again.”

“Sounds wonderful, Ray,” assured Alice. “Tomorrow we’ll call our parents and tell them the good news. We’ll figure out the legal arrangements later on. Won’t the kids be surprised to find out they have a new baby sister. She and Helen will practically grow up together. Have you given her a name yet?”

“No, dear, I haven’t.”

“How about Margaret?” suggested Alice.

“That’s a wonderful name, dear.”

The sound of the phone ringing in the background drew the couple out of their content trance. Ray looked at the clock on the wall and realized it was for him. Only the hospital would call at this late of an hour. He left the young child in his wife’s care and walked to the kitchen to answer the phone.

“Hello, this is Dr. Drake.”

“Hello Dr. Drake,” began the voice on the end of the line. “This is Nurse Abbot from labor and delivery. A patient of yours checked in just a few minutes ago and she’s pretty far into labor. I’m guessing that she’ll deliver within a few hours. She’s in some pain and wants you to come down. She’s a younger girl, we thought you might want to come on in.”

“What’s the patient’s name?” asked Raymond, trying to regain his sense of reality.

“Ms. Laura Donathon. She’s here with her aunt. She says there is no father, and she’s really shaken up. We’re working with her, but she seems really set on you being here with her.”

“Oh yes, my young patient. I promised Laura that I would stay with her through the entire labor. I know how nervous she is. I’ll be down as soon as I can. Tell her I’m on my way, please.”

“Yes, doctor. Sorry to wake you at such a late hour.”

“That’s all right, Nurse Abbot. I was awake anyhow. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Ray returned to the room where his wife held the sleeping child in her arms. She looked up at him with a warm smile, and he realized how lucky he was to have such an understanding wife.

“Was that the hospital?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” he answered. “It seems my young patient has gone into labor. I told her I would be there the minute she needed me. I had better head down there and calm her. Will you be all right?”

“I’m pretty used to having new babies in my home. I think I’ll manage just fine.”

“We’ll have to figure out how we’ll handle Edward’s funeral. I don’t want his widow to find out about this, but we really need to be there.”

“I’ll call my sister this morning,” Alice responded. “We’ll leave all the kids with her during the funeral. Edward’s wife hardly knew us. She won’t ask very many questions, I’m sure. You go help that little girl deliver her new baby. Margaret’s going to need some other children in this town who are her own age.”

Margaret woke up around two o’clock in the morning. She checked the clock on her nightstand and climbed out of bed. The house was deathly quiet at the late hour, and she knew now was the opportune moment to search through the files her father had locked up.

The evening had given Margaret time to think things over carefully. Amy was right, Margaret felt better now that she had put the experiment out of her mind and thought about her life with her parents. She could find no faults in the job they had done raising her. She had no complaints.

Realizing the sincerity of their love, Margaret wondered even more where she had come from, and who her real parents were. She hoped that the answers would lie in the files in her father’s office. The suspense of not knowing drove her mind into a frenzy with intrigue.

Margaret tiptoed down the hallway, to the stairs leading to the main floor of the house. As she passed her parents room, she placed her ear on the door to make sure they were both asleep. She clearly heard the sound of her father snoring through the flimsy wooden door, and then continued her trek downstairs.

Margaret reached the study and shut the door securely behind her. In less than a minute she had turned on the small reading light and opened the drawer which contained the information about the experiment. She read over the books more carefully this time, looking for specific information.

She studied some of the journals her father kept of her once he had taken her into his home. The manner in which he wrote everything surprised her as she looked through it. Before long, she grew to understand her father's feelings for her much more clearly.

He had written the observations he made in a very personal and caring style. The journal seemed less like scientific research and more like detailed notes that a father had taken of his child. Through the words he had written down, Margaret could tell that he was very proud of her and the accomplishments she made. He wrote the entire work from the standpoint of a father, and the words brought tears to her eyes as she realized the mistake she had made in her earlier judgment of the situation.

After a while, Margaret stopped and looked up at the clock on the wall of the room. Surprise overcame her as she realized that two hours had passed and she still had no information about her real parents. She placed the books her father had kept to the side and started back through Dr. Penn's journals.

Margaret went through the books much more carefully this time. She found the section of the books where she located the first pictures of the child, and began working back, searching for the information. She found the information in a lone paragraph from the section describing her father's first role in the experiment.

It amazed Margaret to learn that her father had supplied Dr. Penn with the child for the experiment. The beginning of the section described in detail that both Dr. Penn and her father realized the ethical questions that would arise from the procedure they would perform, and that they accepted full responsibility for their actions. Margaret gained a new perspective of her father as she realized the risks he had taken with his career to bring her into the world.

The section describing Margaret's parents was only a paragraph long and not very descriptive. It didn't list the names, but did refer to a patient number kept by the clinic where her father worked. Margaret read the entry several times in disbelief.

"...The patient has opted to abort the fetus she carries at this point in time. This will be the third abortion the patient has had performed in the past two years. Both of the previous abortions were performed under the care of Dr. Raymond Drake without complications, and the children were judged as healthy during the post examination of the aborted fetus.

The mother of the fetus was sedated using a heavy tranquilizer and pain killers, and the procedure listed below was performed to transfer the child to the Artificial Uterus. The mother

has no knowledge of this experiment or the procedure that was performed during the period of her unconsciousness. It was performed without her consent. The child was removed from her uterus as promised, but using a procedure which would not sacrifice the life of the unborn child..."

Margaret's hand froze up as she finished reading the section and the book fell from her grasp. She sat perfectly still as a coldness came over her body. Anger again filled her heart, as it had earlier in the day. This time, however, she didn't direct it towards her parents, but at the mother who had carried her for two months.

Pain shot up her jaw as she realized she was grinding her teeth tightly together. She picked up the book and studied the patient number carefully. The file that listed the numbers, and the names they corresponded with, sat at the beginning of her father's files and she pulled out the keys to learn her original mother's name.

Margaret walked over to the file cabinet containing her father's patient files and pulled out the first document. He updated the files twice a year and sorted them by number. She ran through the list of numbers quickly, locating the number from the notebook without any problems. The name Heather Alexander seemed to glare back at her from the page.

Margaret returned the document and opened the file cabinet corresponding to the beginning of the alphabet for the patients' files. Alexander was one of the first few files she came across.

Margaret returned to the desk with the file and opened it up on the desktop. She heard a creaking noise in the supports of the house and realized that somebody in the house had caused the noise. She held perfectly still for some time before she shrugged it off as her father tossing in his sleep.

She decided that she would return all the files from the experiment in some kind of order so her father wouldn't notice she had gone through them. Margaret didn't want to rush herself throwing everything back in its place, in the event that her father awoke and came looking for her. She set her real mother's file aside and carefully organized the other books she had spread out across the floor.

With the cabinet back in order, Margaret locked up the drawer and returned the key to the desk. She pulled open the files of Heather Alexander and began sorting through the series of documents.

The file contained many papers describing Heather's health. Margaret figured out from the dates on the papers that Heather was her father's patient for about three years. The files supported what he had written in the experiment about Heather, she had gone to Dr. Drake for three different abortions.

Margaret paid particular attention to the writing about the third abortion. The documents looked almost identical to the first two. The only difference was in the way her father referred to the last procedure. Instead of referring to it as an aborted pregnancy, he wrote that he had removed the fetus from its mother with her consent.

Margaret pulled out a piece of scratch paper and wrote down some of the information in the files. She thought it odd that even with the procedure he had performed, he wrote it up so that it all seemed completely legitimate from a legal standpoint.

Margaret searched through the documents until she located a section she found particularly interesting. Her father had taken some notes from a pre-abortion screening he had done with Heather. She read carefully, picking out specifics from the file.

“... Heather exhibits no feelings for the child she is carrying. I asked her several questions about the father of the child. She told me the child was a product of a one night affair she had shared with a football player. The only information she could give me about the father was a number that he wore on his jersey. It was the number “87.”

I asked her if she had contacted him to tell him about the pregnancy, and she expressed a strong desire to keep the issue to herself. She seems completely unwilling to even consider keeping the child. I asked her at this time if she didn’t think she should at least try to contact the father and tell him about her decision, but she denied my request.

I also explained to the patient, the negative effects that might occur to her body if she kept having repeated abortions. I strongly advised her to use birth control on a regular basis so that she wouldn’t keep getting herself into this sort of situation. I fear that these advisements were taken lightly.

As a last attempt, I told her that I would not be able to perform the abortion on this day and would have to make an appointment for later in the week. I hope that by giving her some more time to think about her decision, she might fail to show up for the procedure. However, I’m sure my hopes are in vain and will plan on performing the procedure as asked at a later day in the week...”

Margaret sat in the chair feeling sorry for herself for several minutes before she remembered what her friend Amy had told her. Her best friend had a sense of things. Her insight had amazed Margaret many times before, and she hadn’t failed this time either.

She remembered the advice Amy had given her earlier. “...Don’t judge them until you know the truth. Maybe your real mother died and they removed you to try to save your life. If that’s the case, then your dad might have saved your life...”

Amy was right, Margaret's dad had saved her life. She realized that now. Her mother was alive though, and she knew nothing about the daughter she decided to abort. Margaret thought to herself for some time. In a sense, something did die the afternoon of the abortion. It was not Margaret, however.

Margaret sat back in the chair and finished writing down the notes she had taken. She looked through the rest of the file and found that Heather had returned only one time after the procedure for a follow-up visit and then her father had never heard from her again.

Margaret looked through the files for one last bit of information. She found Heather's address listed on the first sheet in the file. She knew it had probably changed in the past eighteen years, but figured it was the only bit of information she had so far to try to track the woman down.

Chapter Eight

Margaret arrived at Amy's house after school got out. She knocked on the door and waited for her friend to answer. The afternoon air felt hot, and reminded Margaret that even Deer Hollow experienced summer heat. Margaret didn't enjoy extreme heat. Amy's mother opened the door and invited her inside the house.

"Good afternoon, Margaret, please come in. Amy still hasn't made it home yet, but I expect her any moment, you're welcome to wait for her."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jensen," answered Margaret.

"My name's Laura."

"Sorry," Margaret apologized. "I got out of school a few minutes early and there isn't anyone home at my house right now. I thought I would take the chance that Amy got out of class early too. With the last week of school, a lot of teachers let us out early."

"Yes, Margaret, I remember those days of high school, but Amy had to stop by the office to talk with her counselor. It might be a little while before she gets home. You're welcome to come out in the kitchen and wait with me, I'm in the middle of making some cookies for dessert tonight."

"All right, Mrs. Jensen," answered Margaret, seduced by the smell of food in the house. She followed Amy's mother into the kitchen and sat down at the table. From the temperature in the room, she judged that Laura had spent most of the afternoon cooking.

"Please, call me Laura," urged Mrs. Jensen. "I know I seem really old to you, but I don't feel old enough to be called Mrs. Jensen by anyone."

"I'm sorry."

"So, are you getting excited to graduate?" asked Amy's mother.

"Not really," answered Margaret. "I don't think the reality has hit just yet. It doesn't feel very different than the end of any other school year. I have so many plans for summer that I don't really stop to think that next year I won't be going back."

Laura walked over and handed Margaret a warm cookie from the cooling racks on the counter. Margaret loved Laura's kitchen. Laura had bought this house because of the kitchen's size and redid it to fit her passion for cooking. Laura designed the room to allow plenty of sunshine inside.

The solid oak cabinets and white tile floor gave the room a bright and cheery appearance. Laura's husband had put a large bay window along the wall of the adjoining dining room, and the view of Laura's flower garden was spectacular during the summer bloom. He told her that if she spent all her free time in the kitchen, she ought to have the most beautiful kitchen she could get, and she did.

“You’ll be surprised the difference you’ll feel once you have your diploma in your hand,” Laura explained. “It’s only three days from now, then public education is all behind you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Laura had her apron over the shorts and T-shirt she wore while lounging around the house. She worked mornings as a part-time accountant for one of the larger businesses in town. That gave her the rest of the day to work around her house and enjoy her hobbies while taking care of her family.

Laura had her hair pulled back in a barrette. She did aerobics each day and enjoyed working out and playing sports at the local health club. Her interest in exercise had maintained her thin waist and youthful figure. The shorts she wore exhibited the firmness and muscle tone of her strong legs.

Margaret respected Laura and looked at her as a role model. Some of Laura’s ambition had rubbed off on her daughter, Amy, but she seemed more interested in learning than fitness. Amy still enjoyed sports and played tennis and volleyball with her mother, but Margaret felt that Laura and she shared the common bond in the extreme desire for fitness and sport.

Margaret particularly liked how Laura balanced her life. She loved her husband and enjoyed spending time with him, but also worked and had a great number of friends she socialized with. They often went to lunch together and had friendly competitions in racquetball or other sports.

Margaret hoped that when she reached that point in her life, she maintained as well rounded of a lifestyle as Laura. Laura never seemed burned out or depressed. Her attitude inspired Margaret. Everyone who knew her, liked her.

“Do you know what you’re going to study in college?” asked Laura in an interested voice.

“I really enjoy photography, but you have to be pretty good to get a start in it. My dad wants me to get something a little more solid than that. He’s probably right, I think I want to do the photography as a hobby. So I’ll probably take a variety of courses until I find something I think I would enjoy doing for a living.”

“That’s pretty smart. You can always do your photography on the side and if you’re really good at it, maybe make a business out of it.”

“Yeah, that’s what my dad said.”

“So what are you doing this summer?” asked Laura. She walked back over to where Margaret sat eating and had a seat in the stool across the breakfast bar from her.

“I’ll probably go visit with my Aunt Kate for a few weeks. They live on the outskirts of Harrison.”

Laura didn't say anything in response. Margaret looked up and noticed that she had a strange look on her face. She seemed upset and confused at the same time. Margaret thought maybe she hadn't heard of it before.

"It's a little bit larger than Deer Hollow," explained Margaret. "It's up north about three hours away. I've gone there every year since I was eight years old to spend some time with my relatives. They have a large ranch with horses and cattle. It's a great town."

"I know all about Harrison," replied Laura, looking back at Margaret with a smile. "I grew up there. Well, at least for the first seventeen years of my life. When I got pregnant with Amy, I moved here to live with my Aunt, until I had my baby.

"My parents remained there for about three years before they moved to Ohio. I stayed here with my Aunt and got a job to support Amy and myself. I've only been back to Harrison one time since I had Amy, on her first birthday."

"I didn't know you were from Harrison. Did you go to high school there?" Margaret asked, now deeply interested in the conversation.

"I started my senior year there," answered Laura, "but when I got pregnant, I couldn't face any of my friends with it. It was completely out of character for me, and Amy's father didn't want anything to do with me. I finished school here after I had Amy."

"Do you still have friends there?" asked Margaret.

"I had a lot of friends there, but when I started new here, I put them all behind me. I've never talked with anyone I went to school with there. Even when I went to visit on Amy's first birthday, I hid in my parent's old house the whole time."

"It must have been difficult for you."

"Sure it was," Laura answered with a hint of a smile, "but we all have moments of poor judgment and do things we regret. You can't dwell on it forever. Eventually you have to move on. I don't have any regrets now."

Margaret had never heard Laura talk about her past, and she felt nosy for asking questions, but she wanted to know more. She had always wondered about the circumstances surrounding her friend's mother, and now Laura seemed to want to tell her.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Margaret asked hesitantly.

"Sure, I brought it up."

"What happened to the guy?"

"That was a long time ago, Margaret. I was young and naive, and I fell for a guy who I didn't know that well. I didn't realize at the time what he was doing. He was the whole package, image and everything, and I allowed myself to get wound up in him without stepping back to realize what was happening.

“I found myself being manipulated by him without even noticing that he was doing it. He was a slick one. He played me like a deck of cards, and then left me. When I found out I was pregnant, I didn’t want anything to do with him.

“Learn from my mistakes, Margaret. There’s a lot of people out there just like him. They live to use people and get some sense of power out of controlling other people’s lives. While I was involved with him, he had complete control of me, even though I thought I held my own strings. They keep using people, as long as they get away with it. They don’t ever stop, if they’re as good as he was at the game he played. It’s better not to get involved with them, because you can’t win. Always step back, and put your feelings aside. Imagine yourself looking at another couple, and try to decide if they both love each other. If it is wrong, just leave, you can do better. Nobody deserves that.”

“So you never think about him?”

“Oh, I still have resentment, but I would never have wanted him to take any role in the raising of my child. I love my daughter, and I’ll never regret having her. I would never change things, even if I could.

“Everything you’ve done in your life has led you to where you are right now. I like where I am. I just wish I could have gotten here without ever crossing paths with him.”

“You don’t wish you could get even somehow?”

“I have faith that someday he’ll get what he deserves. The only way someone like that is impacted is if you destroy their self-image. Somebody will come along and use and control him. When it’s all over, he’ll see the other side of the fence. Someone will come along who’s better at the game he plays than he is. If you play it long enough, the game will destroy you.”

“Does he still live in Harrison?”

“I have no idea, Margaret. Like I told you, we all make bad judgments. I didn’t dwell on mine. I learned a valuable lesson and didn’t make the same mistake again. I don’t keep track of people like that in my life. It’s been a long time since I was in Harrison.”

“Where in Harrison did you live?” asked Margaret

“My parents’ house was on Hazelwood Road, not far from the high school,” answered Laura.

Margaret’s mind moved at a feverish pace as she realized that her real mother and Laura were the same age. It suddenly occurred to Margaret that she might know the woman. She concentrated on the notes she had taken about Heather, trying to remember the address of her home. Finally, it came to her.

“Is that anywhere near Brentwood Avenue?” asked Margaret.

“It’s a few blocks away.”

“Do you know the Alexander family, they lived on Brentwood. They had a daughter named Heather.”

“Why do you ask that?” asked Laura, her eyes filled with rage and suspicion. Margaret had never seen Laura this upset before.

“Mrs. Alexander is a friend of my Aunt’s,” proclaimed Margaret, realizing she had hit a nerve. She knew nothing about the Alexanders, but knew she needed to verify her story. “Heather was your age, I thought you might know her.”

The expression on Laura’s face returned to her usual cheerful self. Margaret realized she had accepted the story as she climbed out of her chair and returned to preparing the cookies.

“I’m sorry, Margaret, I didn’t mean to snap at you,” Laura replied. “I haven’t heard that name in years. She used to be my best friend when I lived in Harrison. I haven’t talked to her forever. It just caught me off guard when you brought her name up.”

Margaret breathed a sigh of relief as the tension in Laura’s voice dropped slightly. She realized she should drop the entire conversation, but knew she had found somebody who could provide her with some answers. She continued to question Laura.

“So you haven’t seen Heather since you left high school? You don’t keep in touch at all?”

“Not really,” answered Laura, seemingly calmer now. “She did send a wedding announcement to my house when she got married, but I couldn’t make it to the ceremony. That was the last I had any sort of communication with her. I just lost track of her.”

“I remember that she was married,” recollected Margaret. “Did she ever have any kids?”

Laura remained quiet for a moment, as if in deep thought. She looked up at Margaret, determined to remember. Margaret could tell that she kept something else about Heather a secret.

“Come to think of it,” answered Laura. “I believe my mother mentioned that she did have a child about a year and a half younger than Amy. I don’t know about any more than that. My parents moved away soon after that.”

“Who was it that she married again?” asked Margaret. “I always forget.”

“The boy’s name was Todd Whitmore,” Laura said without glancing up from her cookie dough.

Margaret struggled to remember where she knew the vaguely familiar name. Then she remembered the night Amy and she had looked through her father’s files and found the name of Amy’s real father. She fought to act as if the name meant nothing to her, but inside her heart pounded with disbelief.

Margaret’s real mother had married Amy’s real father. Margaret looked down at her feet, trying to hide her amazement. She suddenly realized why the question about Heather had upset Laura so terribly. She started to regret bringing Heather’s name up.

“I knew him also,” continued Laura. “I went to school with them both. I lost track of what happened to them after my parents moved away. Heather had always pressured me to try sex when I didn’t really feel ready for it yet. I always resented that and I guess that in a way I blamed her the situation I got myself into, but I shouldn’t really, she was a good friend. In a way, I wish I knew how she was doing these days.”

“Well,” spoke Margaret. “Maybe if I see Mrs. Alexander while I’m visiting my aunt, I can find out for you.”

“Yeah,” Laura answered with a smile. “Maybe you can.”

The sound of the front door opening cut the conversation short. Margaret looked over at Laura who stared directly at her. Laura ran a finger over her lips, signaling Margaret to keep the conversation between them. Margaret nodded back and smiled at her friend’s mother.

Margaret heard the sound of a backpack hitting the floor as Amy dropped her books to the ground. Amy walked down the hall towards the smell of fresh baked cookies.

“Hello dear, how was your day?” asked Amy’s mother as Amy walked into the kitchen and found the two of them waiting for her.

“All right,” answered Amy. She glanced over at her friend who sat enjoying a cookie. “Hi Margaret, how are you doing? I didn’t see you in first period today.”

“I’m great, I just overslept. I was up pretty late last night.”

“How did your meeting with your counselor go?” asked Amy’s mother as she handed each girl a warm cookie. Amy walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a container of milk.

“All right,” Amy answered. “I got everything worked out and I think I’m set. Three more days and it’s all over. I can’t wait.”

The two girls finished their cookies while Laura filled the sheet with fresh dough. She placed the tray on top of the oven and waited for the buzzer to tell her the second batch had finished. Amy got up from the table and walked towards the hallway.

“Come on, Margaret, I have to get changed and then we can go mess around for a while.”

“All right,” answered Margaret, getting up from her chair to follow. She signaled to Laura that she would keep her mouth shut about their talk as she followed Amy to her room. “Thanks for the cookie, Mrs. Jensen.”

“Laura,” Amy’s mother called out. “Call me Laura.”

“Sorry, Laura.”

Amy grabbed her backpack off the floor as she led the way down the hall to her room. Margaret caught up with her friend and closed the door behind her as she stepped inside. Amy set the pack down on her desk and walked over to her closet to get a change of clothes.

“So did you find anything out?” asked Amy.

“Yeah,” explained Margaret in a somber tone. “You were right, my father did save my life.”

“Did your real mother die or something?”

“No, she aborted me.”

Amy turned around with a look of astonishment across her face. She remained silent for some time, then snapped out of her trance and turned the blinds so she could change her clothes. Margaret knew that she still had a hard time believing the story.

“What’s that saying that your mom always uses when referring to her pregnancy with you?” Margaret asked Amy.

“Which saying?”

“Unplanned pregnancy, not unwelcomed?”

“Yeah,” agreed Amy. “That’s the one.”

“Well, I guess I wasn’t even welcomed.”

“I don’t understand, Margaret. What’s going on here?”

“I looked through the papers again last night like you suggested,” answered Margaret. “I found everything. I was up for a couple of hours reading through some of the journals my father and Dr. Penn kept.

“My real mother chose to terminate her pregnancy. She was almost eighteen when she got pregnant, and went to my dad for an abortion. He sedated her and let Dr. Penn do the procedure. Dr. Penn hooked me up to some kind of life support device for seven months until I finished developing. The last seven months of my development occurred inside a machine, not my mother’s womb.”

“No way.”

“Yeah, my mother wanted nothing to do with me.”

“She was really young,” uttered Amy.

“She was the same age as your mother when she got pregnant with you.” Margaret spoke more slowly now, with honesty. “I don’t want you to think that I just stayed your friend because I pitied you or anything, because your friendship is one of my most cherished possessions, but I always felt sort of sorry for you, because you only had one parent. Now I found out that you had one more parent than I did.”

“You have parents,” argued Amy.

“You’re right,” agreed Margaret, “and I love them with all my heart. I never realized the sacrifice they made for me until I read some of the journals my dad kept. I owe them everything that I am. I could never ask for better parents. It’s just that now I don’t know where I fit in.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, your mother kept you, even without a father to help her out. That shows her love for you. Adopted kids know that their mothers loved them enough to acknowledge that they weren’t ready to care for them, and wanted to give them to a better home, but my mother didn’t even love me enough to give me a chance at life. It makes me wonder if I should really be here or not.”

“What are you saying? You’re here aren’t you.”

“Do you believe in God, Amy?”

“Of course I do.”

“So do I, Amy. I also believe that God gives children as a gift to their parents. Sometimes those parents don’t want their children and have abortions. I think God can foresee that the parent will do that.”

“I’ve never really thought about it that way.”

“Neither had I,” answered Margaret. “Until last night. I just wonder if my father and Dr. Penn didn’t go too far by trying to save my life. If God knew that a mother wouldn’t keep her child, maybe he sent her a child that wasn’t really meant to be on this earth.”

“You lost me again.”

“It’s the way my dad explained babies that are born dead,” explained Margaret. “He believes that God never plans on that child spending a life on earth. He thinks that God gives the child some small bond with a pair of earthly parents, but there is never any intent for that child to actually see the light of the sun. It’s sort of a round trip ticket, where you don’t really get off anywhere.

“When my father brought me into the world, he did something which was never intended to occur. Perhaps he overstepped his bounds and changed God’s mind for him. It bothers me to think that my existence here might not be approved of by the God I believe in.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Maybe God never planned on my existence.”

“I think I’ll disagree with you on that one. Perhaps God planned for things to happen just the way they did.”

“I just wonder if I’m supposed to be alive.”

“But you are,” explained Amy, “and nobody can take that away from you now. Your mother couldn’t when she tried to abort you. I think you’re part of something greater than you know. I’m sure God could easily arrange a random bolt of lightning to cross your path if he really didn’t want you here.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I’m sure of it.”

“There’s still the issue of my mother to deal with,” spoke Margaret.

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m gonna track her down. I’ll find her, and when I do, I’ll mess up her life a bit. She ought to witness first hand what she did to me.”

Amy looked back at Margaret with a frightened look on her face. The stare made Margaret feel as if she had committed a terrible crime. She realized immediately that Amy didn’t share her feelings towards the woman who had aborted her. Margaret recognized that she sounded like a crazed maniac in expressing her emotions and wished she could take it all back.

“You’re kidding, right?” asked Amy.

“Of course I am,” spoke Margaret in an assuring voice. “I don’t even know her name. I don’t care to know her name at this point. She didn’t want anything to do with me then, and I don’t want anything to do with her now. At least I know the truth about my real parents.”

“So are you gonna say anything to your parents?” asked Amy.

“No,” answered Margaret. “They’ve chosen not to bring up the subject for almost eighteen years now, I plan to do the same. What I don’t know won’t hurt me and what they don’t know that I know won’t hurt them either.”

“You lost me on that one too.”

“I’m gonna treat it as if I never found a thing. My dad’s waited this long to tell me, chances are he never will.”

“I can’t believe this,” spoke Amy with excitement. “This is so incredible. You were supposed to be aborted. I shouldn’t even be speaking to you right now. You’re part of something really big here. Wouldn’t your real mom be shocked if she found out about you?”

“And wouldn’t your dad be surprised if he found out about you?”

“What are you talking about now?” asked Amy, confused again.

“While I was talking to your mom, I was telling her about my trip to Harrison this summer. She was telling me how she used to go to school there.”

“Yeah,” exclaimed Amy. “I know that.”

“Well, I also asked her if she had any old friends back there. Don’t mention to her anything about our conversation. I’m sure your mom thinks we’re totally unaware of who your father is, but she gave me a few names of kids she used to go to school with, and Todd Whitmore was one of them.”

“So she did go to high school with him,” exclaimed Amy.

“Yeah,” answered Margaret, “and I’m sure that while I’m there this summer, I can round up a little bit of information about the man.”

“You mean you’ll try to find him?”

“I won’t give up until I do find him, I guarantee it.”

“See if you can find out his address.”

“I guarantee you, Amy, I’ll find out more about him than just his address.”

Amy smiled back at her friend. Margaret realized she had cooled the situation and that Amy no longer thought she was a psycho. She still felt betrayed and confused about the emotions she felt. She knew she couldn’t share any more of her news with Amy. She knew Amy wouldn’t like what she had planned. Deep down inside her, the desire to find her mother and confront her remained.

“All right, you two, give me a smile.”

Amy and Margaret stood outside their school auditorium. Students and parents trying to take pictures, filled the foyer to the auditorium. The girls wore their white caps and gowns. Their parents had asked them to stand together so they could each get a shot of the graduated girls.

“Oh, this is just a wonderful picture,” exclaimed Alice.

“Let’s get out of here before we’re stuck here for the evening. I want to take some pictures outside the school,” added Laura.

Raymond walked over to his daughter and gave her a hug. “You did well, sweetheart,” he whispered to her. “The world is at your feet now. You can walk whichever path you choose.”

“Thanks daddy, and thanks for talking mom into my dress.”

The two girls and their parents walked outside to the gently warm spring evening. There were still several hours before the sun would go down, and the night had a mystical feel to it. Most of the other parents were still inside the building, and the families each took turns taking pictures for one another.

“So have you two decided what you’re doing tonight?” asked Laura.

“There’s a dance up the canyon that sounded like fun,” answered Amy. “It’s sponsored by the high school and there should be a lot of people up there. Margaret and I thought we would go up there and try it out.”

“Just remember that many people will be drinking tonight,” added Alice. “Be careful, and keep off the roads as much as possible.”

“We will, Mrs. Drake,” answered Amy. “I’m gonna run home now and get changed. I’ll see you at my house in about an hour, Margaret.”

“All right,” answered Margaret as she walked with her parents to their car in the parking lot. The three climbed inside the car and started away from the school.

“How late are you going to be out this evening, dear?” questioned Alice.

“Probably most of the night, if that’s all right.”

“Sure it is, dear,” answered her father. “Just make sure you’re careful out there. There’s a lot of people out partying tonight. Many of them will be drinking. Watch out for the other drivers, you don’t know if they’re sober or not.”

“You just graduated from high school, Margaret. Your whole life is ahead of you now. Don’t risk it over something stupid,” added her mother.

“I won’t, mom. I have a high value on life.”

The ride home seemed quiet, but Margaret liked it this way. She could enjoy the silence with her parents. Something about the evening felt conclusive to her. She realized it was the last time they would ever drive home from a school function together, and the last time she was just their little girl. She knew that she wasn’t the only person feeling this way, as she could see tears in her mother’s eyes.

Margaret arrived home and changed out of her dress into a pair of jeans and a warm sweater. The evening felt cool in the valley, but would seem much colder up the canyon. Margaret had prepared for the long night ahead of her. She had taken a nap earlier in the day and felt as alert as ever. After tonight, she and Amy might never see some of her friends again, and they planned to make the best of it.

Margaret walked downstairs to where her parents waited in the living room. A gift sat on the table between the two sofas. Her parents had wrapped it in the same color of wrapping paper as the dress she wore to her graduation.

“Open it up,” her father commanded.

Margaret reached down and picked up the box. It felt heavy for such a small package, and she eagerly unwrapped it.

“My camera,” Margaret screamed. “How did you know I wanted this?”

“We asked your photography teacher,” her mother answered. “He told us you had been talking about it. He helped us make sure we got the right one.”

“It’s wonderful,” she raved. “Thank you both so much. I can’t wait to use it.”

“We thought you might want to use it tonight,” her father replied. “We had them load it with the right film for taking pictures at night. You can take it with you to the party, so that you have some mementos of this evening.”

“I love it,” Margaret expressed with tears in her eyes. “Thank you. You’re the best.”

“You earned it,” her mother answered. “Now you go out and have a nice time. Just be careful, we want to see your cheery face tomorrow morning.”

Margaret gave each of her parents a hug and then ran up to her room to empty out her old camera case and pack her new camera inside. She rushed out to her car and headed to Amy’s house to show off her new prize. Her mind seemed momentarily cleared of the last week’s troubling news.

Margaret and Amy talked excitedly about the graduation as they drove up the canyon to the large dance party. Margaret didn’t think that graduating would seem so mystical to her, but

she felt different, and much more aware of her surroundings. The time passed quickly as they traveled up the winding road.

Margaret drove her car down towards the campsite. The party had started an hour earlier and many people were already there. Amy undid her belt before they even located a place to leave the car, and Margaret knew Amy felt as eager to get to the dance as she did.

Margaret found a spot to park the car and realized they had a short hike ahead of them. From the number of cars parked along the road, they knew that the party was already a success. They walked at a good pace towards the center of the dance. The entire mountainside campsite looked packed, and people had wandered far into the parking lot to get some space. The closer they got to the dance, the more crowded the area got.

The two mingled with their other friends for some time while walking around searching for Jeremy and Brandon. The dance organizers had set up a large light system around the area where the dance took place, but the mass of people quickly filled the region and overflowed into the darkness of the night. Nobody had thought to pick a place to meet beforehand, and Margaret just hoped that the boys' path would cross their own.

The two girls finally ran into Brandon, who congratulated them both on their accomplishment. He stood on the outskirts of a large group of people, who surrounded the makeshift dance floor. Only after their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, could they clearly tell who people were in the crowd.

Margaret had to speak loudly to communicate with Brandon over the noise of the crowd. She suddenly felt like a third wheel standing with Amy and Brandon, and wanted to know where to find Jeremy. The smell of the large campfire which burned a short distance away made her wish she could cozy up with him. She had always loved the smell of a fire, and it put her into a romantic mood.

She asked Brandon if he had seen Jeremy. She had seen Jeremy's car parked near Brandon's and knew he was there. Brandon looked over his shoulder and then back at Margaret.

"I just saw him standing by the fire a while ago," Brandon explained. "He was talking with a bunch of people there, but he walked off into the bushes about three minutes ago. I bet he had to take a leak."

Margaret got a strange look on her face as she pulled out her camera that she carried at her side. She had Brandon point out the approximate location where Jeremy had disappeared to, and then excused herself from the two of them to sneak off after Jeremy.

Margaret entered the bushes a short distance from the location Brandon had pointed out. She moved slowly and quietly, hoping to catch him with his pants down. The vegetation absorbed and muffled the noise from the loud speakers, while her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

She found it much easier to sneak through the growth than she expected, and was more aware of her surroundings. She continued through the bushes until she heard a rustling up ahead of her.

Margaret pulled the lens cap off her camera and adjusted the settings for night. There was enough moonlight that she could see rather clearly, and she lifted up the expensive camera to see what the digital indicators inside read. The light indicator told her she had just barely enough light to take a picture.

Margaret focused the lens towards the area where she could hear the noises and started walking closer. She finally reached a point where she could see the figure of a person behind a small bush. She crawled around quietly to get a better angle to take the picture without focusing the lens.

She finally reached a spot where she thought she could get a revealing picture, and sat down to steady her aim. She focused the lens at the direction until she could clearly see the person through the lens of the camera.

Margaret gasped as she realized that it wasn't Jeremy whom she had discovered in the bushes. The body she could clearly make out through her lens, was that of a woman. The girl didn't seem to mind the cold of the evening, she wore nothing to protect her from the chill. Margaret could tell by the rhythmic motions of the naked girl that somebody else lay on the ground beneath her.

Margaret started to take her eye away from the lens, but recognized who the girl was before she could finish the action. She knew the girl was one of Jeremy's friends, and suddenly felt intrigued to see who it was that the girl shared the forest with this evening.

Margaret zoomed the lens away from the girl to get a complete view of the scene. From her point of view, she couldn't see the guy's face very clearly. She watched for several more seconds, before a feeling of guilt crept in on her. She had just about decided to leave the couple alone when the guy sat up and threw his arms around the girl.

Margaret's mouth dropped and her fingers tightened with anger as she recognized the guy's face. Her finger accidentally pressed down on the button it rested on, and before she could stop it, the camera had taken four pictures in quick succession.

Margaret stood up and ran as fast as she could away from the scene. She didn't worry about alerting them as she ran, but knew that they hadn't heard her by the moans which sounded behind her. She worried only of her camera as she hurried back to the crowd of people, and didn't even notice as she ran past another couple sharing a kiss in the brush. Margaret's vision clouded as her heart filled with anger.

She reached the clearing of the campsite, where the majority of people continued to enjoy the party. She wanted to fall down and cry, but not in front of the students she had gone to school

with. She knew she didn't want to make a scene, and so she stopped to compose herself before returning to the party. A few deep breaths, and she returned to her classmates.

As Margaret walked around the large mass of people, her thoughts were somewhere else. She had always trusted Jeremy and never expected him to cheat on her like this. She wanted desperately to hurt him somehow, but made it her strict policy not to speak to a guy if she found out he had seen another girl. Using this approach, she had always maintained her dignity.

She wandered about aimlessly, trying to act as if she enjoyed herself, and trying to lock her feelings away. She wished she could run off and hide for a while, but became lost in the thunderous sounds of the music. She couldn't run and miss this evening, even after all that had happened.

"Hey Margaret, what are you doing all alone," asked a voice from behind her, welcoming her back to reality.

Margaret turned around to find the face of one of her good friends and classmates. Richard Nelson and she had known one another since they first met in the fifth grade. She had always considered him a friend, but felt shy around him, perhaps because she wished he were more than just a friend.

Richard Nelson was the type of guy she could get dreamy about. Not a loud and conceited guy, but rather quiet and shy. He had a rugged look about him, yet soft, warm eyes. Strong, but not an athlete, he always seemed compassionate. Richard was smart, an intellectual of sorts, and could melt her with a glance. The only thing about him was that he had never shown any interest in Margaret, and she always felt he was beyond her grasp, and would always remain a dream.

"Oh, hi Richard," Margaret answered, trying to fight back the tears. "I was just wandering around a bit."

"So, it's all over, do you feel any different?"

Margaret looked at him for a second, trying to figure out how he already knew about her and Jeremy, then she realized that his reference was to graduation. A smile came over her face as she realized her mistake.

"I don't know, I don't think it's hit me yet," Margaret yelled over the noise of the crowd.

"Do you have any regrets?"

"Yeah," Margaret confessed. "I wish I wouldn't have spent the past year dating Jeremy. In fact, I wish I had never dated him at all."

A funny look came over the face of her friend as she finished her sentence. She could tell that he found a certain amount of humor in her remark. She pressed him to find out what he found funny about it.

"Why?" she asked. "Do you have any regrets?"

“Yeah, I regret never having the courage to ask you out.”

Margaret suddenly forgot about the scene she had witnessed a few minutes earlier. She had always had a crush on Richard Nelson, but had never thought he would want to go out with her. She couldn't believe what she had heard, but the remark was just the thing she needed to hear to lift her spirits.

“Well, why didn't you?”

“I never thought you liked me, you always ignored me.”

“I never ignored you.”

“I sat behind you all year in Algebra,” Richard reminded her. “I can only recall one or two times that you really talked to me. You hardly ever even turned around to look at my. I figured you were too serious with your boyfriend to even bother.”

“I know. I really wish I hadn't got that serious with him.”

“I wish I wasn't leaving to work in Nevada for the summer.”

“What are you doing in Nevada?” Margaret asked, amazed at how comfortable she felt around him.

“I work as a hand at a cattle ranch down there.”

“Do you ride horses?”

“Since I was five,” Richard answered. “My parents have four horses that they keep in the town stables. Have you ever ridden before?”

“I love riding,” informed Margaret. “In fact, I'll probably leave soon to visit my aunt up in Harrison. They have a ranch up there where I ride.”

“Will you be home at all in August?”

“Yeah,” Margaret answered. “I won't leave for school until the second week in September.”

“I'll be home for a week at the end of August. Would it be all right if I gave you a call while I'm home. We could take a ride in the mountains.”

“That sounds great,” Margaret exclaimed with a bashful grin on her face. “Do you have my number?”

“I know where you live.”

“Great. You have a nice summer, Richard.”

“You too, Margaret,” he answered, looking into her eyes. She noticed something about the way he smiled at her, something she had never seen when she looked at Jeremy. It made her feel good about herself.

Before he realized what had happened, Margaret reached up and gave him a long kiss. She stepped away and noticed him staring at her with a confused and surprised look on his face. She smiled softly back at him.

“Thanks Richard, I really needed a talk like that.”

“My pleasure,” he answered with a grin.

Margaret lifted her camera and snapped a picture before he could look away. She smiled at him and turned around, running off to find her best friend. She knew that it would take some time in the large crowd.

Margaret returned home quite late that night. Her evening had received one final damper when Amy informed her that she would leave to look at several campuses for the next couple of weeks. Margaret didn't look forward to spending the first two weeks of her summer alone. She felt incredibly tired, but wanted to write her thoughts down in a quick journal entry. She sat down and took a minute to empty her feelings onto the paper.

“...Graduation finally arrived. I thought I had learned as much as I ever would in high school about a week ago, when my teachers finally quit giving lectures, and allowed us to start celebrating, but tonight, I learned a final lesson from my years in school.

I learned a lesson I won't ever forget. I placed too much trust in a friend whom I have dated for over a year now. After discovering him rolling around in the bushes with another girl, I started to ask some of my friends about him and found that he has been seeing other girls throughout the year.

I also feel like I may have made a mistake by limiting myself to only dating one guy over the past few months. I talked with Richard, a guy I've wanted to date since I was in the ninth grade. It turns out he wanted to date me all along also. I wish I would have known this sooner.

My mistake was remaining so loyal to Jeremy, even though I knew I didn't want to end up marrying someone like him. I should have dated some other guys once I knew this. My problem is that I believe more in remaining faithful to my companion than making sure my companion is the right guy for me.

I wish I would have taken more chances while I was in high school. I met Jeremy, and I felt comfortable with him. I didn't want to lose that comfort. I know now that this was wrong. I need to start acting on my impulses a little bit more, and not worry about the consequences. I did that with Richard tonight, and it felt good.

From this day forward, I will not limit myself to a single guy until I find a guy who I'm absolutely sure is what I'm looking for. I also vow that the next guy I meet whom I find out is a womanizer, I will make an example out of. I don't like being used, and I will get even and teach him a lesson.

Anyway, now that Jeremy is behind me, I can concentrate solely on college and the other tasks at hand. Tomorrow I'll talk to my mom about visiting Kate at the ranch soon...”

“Good Morning, Margaret,” Alice called out as she opened the blinds to Margaret’s room. The bright light returned life to the dim room. Margaret had her head buried in her pillow and buried it deeper as the light crept towards her.

“It doesn’t feel like morning.”

“That’s what happens when you stay out until three in the morning. I let you sleep in until ten, but that’s all I’ll give you. I’m not going to allow you to sleep your entire summer away.”

“All right,” Margaret spoke as she lifted her head from her pillow. She squinted as she tried to adjust to the bright lights and rolled out of bed. She wiped the sleep from her eyes and threw her robe on over the night shirt she slept in.

“Your Aunt Kate called last night to wish you congratulations on your graduation. I thought you might give her a call back this afternoon. She wanted to know when you planned to come out and spend a few weeks with her. You are still planning to go out to the ranch, aren’t you?”

“Oh yes, mom,” assured Margaret. “In fact, I wanted to talk with you about that today. Amy is leaving today to spend a few days looking over the two colleges she received scholarships from. She still hasn’t made up her mind where she wants to go, but I figured that as long as she was gone, I might head out to visit Aunt Kate. I would be bored off my rocker here all alone.”

“Well thanks,” teased her mother.

“You know what I mean, mom. There wouldn’t be anyone my age around. I’ll be pulling my hair out by the end of the week. When I call Aunt Kate, can I ask her if I can spend some time with her right now. I would really like to spend some time in Harrison.”

“What about your friend Jeremy? You used to spend a lot of time with him. Is he out of the picture now?”

“I decided last night that it was better to end everything. I want to enjoy college, not worry about him back here.”

“That’s probably smarter anyway, dear. I can’t say I ever really liked him that much, but I try to stay out of your social life. It’s good to meet people who grew up in a different environment than your own. I met your father in college, and we were from opposite sides of the continent.”

Margaret’s mother walked downstairs while Margaret entered the bathroom and started warming up the water in the shower. She had a lot to do if she wanted to leave for Harrison soon.

Chapter Nine

Margaret arrived at the small ranch house on the edge of town late in the afternoon. The warm sun beat down hard against the dry soil of the rangeland. She climbed out of her car and walked over to the fence where the three horses stood gnawing on some alfalfa stubble in the field.

She climbed up onto the wooden rails of the fence and sat down to look at the peaceful animals. One of the horses walked over to her and placed its nose near her face. She reached up with her hand and gently stroked the top of the massive creature's head.

"Hi Blaze," Margaret spoke to the animal. "It looks like you've put some weight on since my last visit. We'll see if we can't work that off you during my next few weeks here."

The horse nodded its head as if it understood her, and Margaret laughed at the wonderful creature. The familiar odor of pasture and horses drifted slowly through her nose and she inhaled deeply. She missed the aroma of nature.

Looking out across the endless open range, Margaret felt comfortable. Her claustrophobia ceased to exist while she spent time here. She jumped off the fence and walked over to the front door of the beautiful home. The smell of barbecued chicken invited her sense of smell as she knocked on the door and turned the knob to let herself in.

"Is that you, Margaret?" called a voice from inside.

"Yes, Aunt Kate, it's me."

"Just in time," Kate called back. "We're just getting ready to sit down and eat. Come on in and wash up."

Margaret walked into the comfortable country home and headed down the hallway towards the bathroom. Her uncle walked out of the restroom with a towel to dry his hands just as Margaret reached the door.

"Well hello, Margaret, how was the drive?"

"Enjoyable, Uncle Jeff. It feels great to be out here on the ranch again. The horses look really good."

"Well, I think we need you to take out old Blaze and trim her down a bit."

"I fully intend too," answered Margaret.

Margaret washed her hands carefully in the sink. She loved the way she could just walk into her aunt's house and feel as if she had lived there all her life. Nobody besides her parents had ever made her feel as welcome as her aunt and uncle.

The couple had never had any children. Margaret remembered very little about them until she reached the age where her parents would let her ride the horses. Ever since then, she spent at

least three weeks at their house each year. Her mom told her that they weren't particularly fond of babies, but they loved taking the young kids for rides on the horses.

Whatever their reasons were, Margaret always looked forward to the time she spent out here. Her Aunt Kate was her brother's and sister's favorite relative, and as Margaret came of age, she learned why. She dried off her hands and walked into the kitchen where the couple sat at the table, dishing up their plates.

Kate's kitchen had a rustic appearance and a country decor. She had never bought a dishwasher and still had the same cast iron oven Margaret had always remembered. Her uncle had finished the pine cabinets and used his handy work to engrave the wood with intricate designs.

The kitchen caught the morning's first light, but at this late hour had little direct sunlight shining inside. The room felt cool and relaxing after the long, hot drive from Margaret's own home.

Margaret's aunt looked up at her as she walked in and a smile covered the entirety of her face. Margaret knew her affectionate aunt was about to embarrass her.

"Look at you," Kate began. "You have just grown up into a beautiful young woman. How was your graduation?"

"It was great," answered Margaret. "I was more than ready for it to arrive."

"Got that last year boredom syndrome, did ya?" asked her uncle, waving her to come to the table and sit down.

"Yeah, senioritis hit me a few months ago," Margaret answered. "It sure is nice to have it all over with."

Her uncle was an easy going guy. Both her aunt and uncle were in their late fifties, but they had a youthful attitude towards life. Their silvery colored hair had never symbolized their age to Margaret, but seemed to shine with life and vigor.

Both of her relatives were in good health, with lean and strong bodies, and had never stopped living life to the hilt. They slowed slightly as the years added up, but they always seemed younger, and never complained about growing older. Their marriage still had a freshness about it, and she knew that their romance flourished, even after years together.

"So what are you going to do while you're here this time?" her aunt asked in a sincere tone.

Margaret liked this most about her aunt. The first thing the woman asked every summer is what the kids wanted to do during their visit. One summer, Margaret told her she wanted to spend as much time riding horses as she could. Her aunt got her up at six o'clock each morning and put her in the saddle with a packed lunch, and Margaret didn't come home until dark each day.

The couple owned a huge plot of land that seemed to go on forever. They only fenced the outside perimeter, and the horses could run free through the whole area. When her sister was younger, the two of them would ride around playing games all day long. She had fond memories of the times spent out here.

“I haven’t really planned any sort of itinerary,” explained Margaret. “I thought I would just enjoy the open countryside and take each day as it comes.”

“Well, that’s a change from your usual list of proposals,” noted her uncle as he handed her some chicken. “I recall you always having a long list of things you had to do while you were here. We even had to lengthen your trips a few times so you could fulfill all your requests.”

“I know,” answered Margaret, “but I’m sort of in limbo right now. There’s a lot of things I want to do, but I want to explore some of the other attractions around these parts.”

Once Margaret arrived at the home, it didn’t take long for her to begin talking with the same ranch accent that her relatives spoke. After many years out here, she had learned to fit in quickly.

“Want to go into town to pick up on guys at the mall, huh?” teased her uncle.

“Actually, I would like to go into town, but not to look for guys. I’ll have plenty of time for guys at college. I just thought it was funny that I’ve been here so many times, yet I don’t know anything about the surrounding area around here. I would like to explore it a little bit.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” answered her aunt. “Just remember, you still need to work that excess stomach off Blaze.”

“Oh, I guarantee I’ll be up bright and early for a morning ride,” answered Margaret, “but I also want to track down a girl I met in school who lives around here.”

“Do you have her address?” asked her uncle. “I could drive you into town tomorrow and drop you by her house if you know the address.”

“Actually, I didn’t think I would ever see her again after I met her. All I know is her dad’s name. I figured I would look it up in the phone book.”

“That’s a good idea,” agreed her aunt. “Now get busy on that chicken, dear. There’s plenty more out on the grill when you finish that one.”

Margaret ate the well-made meal with enthusiasm, engaging in conversation with her favorite relatives the entire time. Dinner lasted only a short while so that the group could finish some small chores around the house and prepare the saddles for morning. Margaret brushed Blaze off and gently combed through her hair.

Margaret could sense the animal’s excitement by its reaction. It seemed as if the animal knew that she was one of the main reasons for Margaret’s visit. The last few weeks had almost made Margaret forget about the wonderful creature she spent time with on these trips.

As darkness began setting in, Margaret entered the house to get a phone book. She returned to the porch with the small book in her arms. Her aunt and uncle sat out on a porch swing watching the beautiful golden sunset.

The evenings spent watching the sunsets were a ritual for her aunt and uncle. She had spent many nights at their home, and could not recall an evening that they didn't share the sunset together. The predictability of their evenings comforted Margaret. In a world where everything changed from day to day, it was nice to know that some things remained the same.

Margaret sat down in another chair on the small wooden deck and thumbed through the names in the book. She looked through the small group of names under Whitmore, but found no listing under the name of Todd. A feeling of helplessness crept over her as she wondered if the family had moved.

"Did you find it?" asked her aunt Kate.

"No," answered Margaret, dismally. "Perhaps they moved."

"What's her father's name?" asked her uncle, hoping to help.

"Todd Whitmore," Margaret answered, looking up at her uncle who had his arm around his wife.

"Well, that explains everything," answered her aunt. "His number's unlisted on purpose."

"Why is that?" Margaret questioned.

"He's our mayor," answered her uncle, chuckling. "Has been for almost three years now. They never list the home phone numbers of public officials in the phone book."

"He's the mayor?" Margaret asked in disbelief.

"Sure," answered her aunt. "Is there something wrong with that? You seem really upset."

"Oh, I don't mean anything by it. I'm just a little bit surprised by her father being the mayor. She never mentioned anything about it when I talked to her."

"Maybe your friend is modest and doesn't want to act like a snob," suggested her uncle.

"Maybe," agreed Margaret. "I think I will take you up on that offer to drive me into town tomorrow, though."

"First thing in the morning?"

"No," she answered. "After our morning ride."

"Sounds great," her uncle answered.

Margaret stared out as the sun fell gently below the seclusion of the distant horizon. Time had no meaning during such an event, and there were no words to describe it. The three sat in silence, with only the gentle creaking of the porch swing to disturb the peace. Even the breeze ceased to blow, so as not to intimidate the majesty of the sunset.

Margaret relaxed with the quiet couple. Their simple way of life and rewarding existence owed only to the constant work with the land they harvested. They were simple people, and that

comforted her immensely. It seemed almost intrusive for her to hinder their basic living with her complicated existence.

As the darkness set in on the large ranch, Margaret realized that her eyes had grown incredibly heavy. She knew that there were still several hours before her usual bedtime, but decided to get some rest so she could start the day early. She bid her aunt and uncle a good night and entered the house.

The morning began early. Margaret had left the blinds in her room open so that the morning sun would wake her. By eight in the morning she had already ridden her horse for almost an hour, showered and eaten breakfast.

Now dressed in more casual clothing than her riding gear, she walked out to the old pickup truck with her uncle and sat down in the passenger seat. The truck started up with a rumble, and the two took off towards town. The drive took about fifteen minutes, and as they drew closer, the houses became more and more crowded together. Her uncle reached the local farmer's market and pulled in with Margaret before dropping her off.

Margaret loved to walk through the market, dreaming about what she would purchase if she had the money and land to raise her own horses. She often fantasized about having the wealth to own a ranch like her uncle's, but doubted that it would ever amount to anything.

As she walked towards the front door of the market, she noticed something that she hadn't thought of before. The city library was only about two blocks away from the market. Margaret stopped before she reached the entrance to the market and called out to her uncle.

"How far away would the mayor's address be from here?"

"Only about eight blocks," answered her uncle. "I'll only be a few minutes, Margaret. I'll take you right there."

"Oh no," Margaret apologized. "I'm not trying to rush you, I just saw the library down the street. I thought I might look up a few of the local attractions before I headed up to try to find my friend. She's probably not up yet anyway, and it would let me spend some quality time in the library planning out my visit."

"All right. Do you want me to run you over to the library now?"

"Actually, uncle Jeff, I wouldn't mind taking a walk. I have all sorts of energy this morning, must be the fresh air out here."

"What will you do if your friend isn't home?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"I can find other things to do to keep me occupied for most of the day. I'd like to surprise her anyhow."

“Sounds just fine,” answered her uncle. “You just give us a call when you get tired of town and we’ll come back into town to pick you up. You’re sure you can find your way around all right?”

“Sure, uncle Jeff. I’ll be just fine, but don’t worry if you don’t hear from me until later this evening. I have some exploring I would like to get started on.”

“You have a good time, dear.”

“I will,” Margaret answered as she started off towards the library with a new spirit of excitement.

The morning air in the town felt brisk against her skin. She had worn a pair of shorts for the long day she planned to spend looking around. She knew that by afternoon the heat in the town would seem unbearable if she wore anything else besides shorts and a T-shirt.

The old city block looked drab in the early morning light. The buildings along the street had lined the corridor for many years and their brick’s appeared weathered. Margaret walked alone down the deserted road. She could easily understand why this section of town had suffered from the addition of more modern shopping malls.

Only the sounds of early morning birds chirping, disturbed the silence of the desolate area. The air smelled as pure as on her uncle’s farm, minus the odor of the horses. The pollution from the surplus of cars in large parking lots rarely made its presence in this part of the city.

Margaret walked into the Harrison City Library and looked around the small building. She could tell that the building was old, and undersized for its purposes. The books inside were stacked on high shelves and the shelves had little space between them for browsing in the aisles. Even the tables for reading seemed packed together.

The building looked abandoned, except for the librarian and an elderly couple who shared a table together in a corner of the building. Margaret walked over to where the librarian sat behind the counter. The woman looked up and smiled at her as she realized that Margaret needed some information.

“Can I help you?” asked the woman behind the counter.

“I’m wondering if you have any old copies of the local newspaper on file?” Margaret asked.

“How far back do you want to go?” asked the woman.

“About eighteen years.”

“You’re in luck,” answered the librarian. “We just had our files updated a year ago and all past newspapers were placed on microfiche to allow us to store them for longer periods of time. Have you ever worked with the microfiche before?”

“Yes,” answered Margaret

“Then you’ll want to head back to our audiovisual room at the back of the library. There are cabinets full of film you can look through. There are three visual machines back there, and this early in the morning, I don’t think anyone is back there to bother you. The other librarian isn’t due in for another hour, so if you need any help, come see me.”

“Thank you,” answered Margaret.

She walked back to the room that the librarian had indicated and found everything as she described it. Margaret set her bag down next to one of the viewing devices and pulled out a small notepad. She could feel her heart pounding from the excitement.

The pad had several bits of information inscribed on it. The first was the number 87 and the rest were dates and calculations. Margaret had used the information she found in her father’s files to try to pinpoint the exact day she was conceived. She had narrowed the time down to a three week stretch. She hoped the paper would contain the information she needed.

After some searching, she located the local paper during the dates that she needed. Two separate reels contained the stretch of film she needed, and she sat down in front of one of the devices to look through them.

To her surprise, the paper only came out three times a week during the times she searched. The sports section was the last part of each newspaper, and she carefully surveyed each page for information about the teams that Harrison played each week in football.

To Margaret’s relief, the newspaper had a policy during the times she searched, where it printed the names and numbers of the players from each team, in the paper before each game. Margaret found no number 87 listed in any of Harrison’s line-ups. She did find two different 87’s that played for other teams during the three week stretch.

She wrote down the names of the teams as she read through the different papers, but didn’t find anything really substantial during the first two weekends of her calculations. Only one paper remained for the last possible weekend that she would have been conceived.

It wasn’t until she opened the paper following the homecoming game that she found anything to help her search. The front page of the town’s Sunday paper following the homecoming game had a large picture of a football player scoring a touchdown. The number on the player’s uniform caught her eye immediately.

Margaret read the writing beneath the picture carefully;
“...West Jefferson’s Greg Thompson crosses the goal line as the final seconds pass away at Friday night’s homecoming game, supplying fans of Harrison with a tremendous upset. More on page 2...”

Margaret quickly shifted the film to the next page of the paper. She read on carefully, but found no other information about the player. She felt a strange sensation as she turned back to

the front page and looked the picture over. Something inside Margaret assured her, he was her father. She even scratched out the other number 87 player from her notes.

Margaret wrote the name down in her book, as well as the name of the school. She felt rather proud of herself for her skills as a detective. Perhaps photography wasn't her real calling in life. She cleaned up her mess and left the room, satisfied with her eventful visit. She thanked the librarian, who now sat all by herself, as she walked out of the lonesome building.

She walked down the street from the library, trying to decide where she would go next. She decided to go to the mall and walk around, trying to clear her thoughts and decide her next course of action. She still wanted to see the woman who had aborted her, but needed to figure out a way to do it without seeming strange.

Margaret walked quickly down the main street of town, realizing that it was two miles to the shopping complex. This section of town was the original commercial center of town. Like most small cities, it had all but blown away, with most of the stores moving to the convenience of mass market. Only a few faithful businesses and offices remained behind to keep the street occupied.

Margaret walked past an old building, not paying any particular attention to it as she continued her journey. She knew Heather's husband had an office with the city, but hadn't realized that this was the city office building she passed. She was deep in thought, and not paying much attention to those few unfamiliar faces who shared the sidewalks with her.

The sound of somebody near her greeting another person caught her by surprise, and she quickly looked over to see if her ears had played tricks on her.

"Good morning, Mayor," uttered the voice of an older man as he walked away from the building. Margaret glanced over just in time to see the back of a man disappearing into the doors of the old building. She stopped suddenly to survey the scene at the building. Margaret stood still in shock, studying the entire area.

There were only several cars parked in the lot. A young girl who had accompanied the man continued down the walkway past the building, towards the park located behind it. She looked over to the parking lot and felt amazed to find one of the cars parked in a stall reserved for the mayor of the city.

The park where the young girl headed, looked only sparsely inhabited by other members of the community. Margaret decided immediately that the mall could wait. She took a slightly different route towards the park, so as not to seem as if she had followed the girl.

Margaret picked a vantage point close enough to keep a close eye on the girl, but far enough away to remain anonymous. She found a park bench and sat down with the journal she carried in her bag. She needed to look busy and inconspicuous.

The girl looked thin, but wore baggy clothes. Her hair hung just below her shoulders, and looked soft and well cared for. It was slightly darker than Margaret's own, and had a natural curl. She had a medium build, but a delicate and trim figure.

As Margaret watched the girl, she realized how pretty the girl could be, if she didn't hide her features. The girl wore shorts and an oversized T-shirt, which did little to accent her appearance. It was a lazy look, and fitting for a relaxed summer day, but the girl could look much better if she wanted.

Margaret took advantage of the time to write down some information in the newly purchased journal. She had decided to keep a new journal after her graduation night. She decided to start with a whole new book, as a symbol of the new realization of her past. She bought it right before she left her hometown for the journey to her Aunt Kate's home.

Margaret opened up the book and read over the first entry before writing anything further. She had dated it the night before.

"...Today I purchased this journal to keep notes of the events taking place during my journey in the search of the woman who conceived me. I have decided to keep this journal to document what occurs during my trip.

I learned about the project began by Dr. Penn approximately one week ago and have been searching for the woman who aborted me ever since. I have now learned her name and the community where she resides.

I also realize that the project that was taken over by my father, Dr. Raymond Drake, means a lot scientifically. My life is a product of this experiment and I am a living study, whose everyday existence is researched.

For these reasons, I have decided to keep this journal not only to document my actions, but also my feelings. I have three weeks to find the woman named Heather Whitmore. I still haven't decided what I will do if and when I do find her, but I do need to find her, if for nothing else than to look her in the face and try to understand why she did what she did.

Through my own investigation of files pertaining to the project, I was also able to find several clues as to the identity of my true father. I don't know if locating him will be an easy task, but right now it isn't my primary concern.

Tomorrow I will journey into town and find the home of Heather Whitmore. This has been made easier by the revelation of my uncle that Todd Whitmore, Heather's husband, is the local mayor. My aunt and uncle believe I know one of their children and am looking to reacquaint myself to a daughter. This is a lie, I have no intentions of speaking with the child.

I will end here, so I can get some rest as I have a busy day planned for tomorrow. I will sign in as soon as I get some more information..."

Margaret looked up from the entry and over to the tree where the young girl sat reading. She could see the cover of the book and recognized the novel as a steamy romance that she had read herself several months earlier. She smiled to herself, thinking she had already found something that her sister and she shared.

She paid little attention to the book, instead staring long and hard at the girl. Something bothered her about the young woman, and she couldn't put a finger on just what it was. She looked extremely familiar to Margaret.

A feeling of panic came over Margaret once she realized what she was staring at. She picked up the pen and dated the next page of the journal.

"...I am currently sitting in a park at the center of town. I just finished looking through some old newspaper reels at the library. I should also note that I now have the name of my father, but I will get back to that later.

I am watching something which deeply disturbs me, and in the interest of this project, I must be completely honest about all my feelings during my stay here.

I am now looking over at the daughter of Heather and Todd Whitmore. In all honesty, I must confess that I learned about Todd Whitmore long before I had any idea that my parents had adopted me and that I was involved in the artificial uterus project.

The night I came across the information which led me in the search for my mother, I was aiding a good friend of mine who wanted to know the identity of her father. My friend's mother was a patient of my father and I knew I could help her find the answer to her question.

It was upon looking through her files that we came across the name of Todd Whitmore. He was listed as the father on my friend's documents. I learned later that Todd Whitmore had married the woman who aborted me.

Since leaving the library, I have run across the office of the mayor and located who I believe is one of his daughters. Scratch that, I'm sure she is one of his daughters, as well as my own mother's. I am looking across at her from a park bench at this moment.

On my nightstand at home I have a picture of myself and my friend, Amy, standing outside at a picnic I went to with her and her parents. The picture was taken a year ago and is only of us. I see it each morning and it reminds me of our friendship.

Right this moment, as I look over at the young girl in the park, I see both of the faces from that picture. Both of the images from the picture brought together as one face on this girl. I can't describe my feelings now, to realize that somehow, Amy and I are linked by this girl who is a half sister to each of us. I've never had such a strange feeling like this before.

It helps me to realize that Amy and I are sisters. We always have been. I know that we really aren't, but with this missing link now sitting before me, I realize Amy and I have more than just a friendship. We are both of the same circumstances..."

Margaret stopped suddenly as she noticed the sound of sprinklers coming on in the park. She closed her journal quickly to keep it dry and looked around to make sure she remained safe from the water.

The sprinklers had come on only in one section of the park, and unluckily for the young girl reading on the grass, they forced her to take refuge. She jumped up and ran away from the emerging water.

Margaret put the journal away in her bag and watched as the girl hurried towards her. Margaret could hardly believe when the girl stopped at the bench to sit down. Something about facing the girl had bothered her. She felt guilty for spying on the unaware girl. At the same moment, she felt excited to meet the girl, when she already knew so much about her.

"Do you mind sharing your bench?" asked the girl.

"Not at all," answered Margaret. "Looks like the sprinklers are out to get you."

"That's the story of my life lately. Everywhere I go it tries to rain on me."

"How do you like the book so far?" asked Margaret, taking advantage of the opportunity.

"It's rather slow," answered the girl.

"It gains some momentum towards the third chapter."

"Have you read it?" asked the girl.

"Sure," answered Margaret. "I've read all her books. I love the imagery that she uses to describe the scenes. It's a pretty stimulating novel to read."

"I know," answered the girl in an excited tone. "My mom would die if she knew I was reading it."

Margaret looked over at the girl who had gone back to reading where she left off. She didn't notice Margaret staring back at her. Margaret realized this was the easiest way to meet Heather. Besides, after that last remark, she already liked the girl.

"My name is Margaret Drake."

"Oh," uttered the girl apologetically. "I'm sorry. My name is Carol. You aren't from around here, are you?"

"Actually," answered Margaret. "I believe I started out here, but I grew up far away from here. I'm in town visiting my aunt right now. She lives on the outskirts of town."

"How long are you in town for?"

"Just a few weeks," answered Margaret. "Is there anything exciting to do in town during the summer?"

“It all depends on what you’re into. You can find things to keep your interests, but it’s really quite a quiet town.”

“I know. That’s one of the reasons I enjoy it so much.”

“How old are you, Margaret?”

“I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks,” Margaret answered. “I just graduated last week. How about you?”

“I’ll be starting my junior year this fall. I hope it flies by, I can’t wait to graduate, so I can leave.”

“Why do you want to leave?”

“It’s hard to explain, but when your parents run the entire town, it’s as if you can never get out of the house. Everywhere I go people know me and I never get away from their rules.”

“I don’t understand?” Margaret lied, now growing comfortable with her act.

“I’m sorry,” apologized the young woman. “I expect you to know who I am too. My father’s the local mayor, and my mother is pretty high up in the city affairs. Between the two of them, they control a large section of the county. Everywhere I go, they have control over me. If I stay out too late one night, they impose a curfew on the entire city, and the police enforce it.”

“That sounds awful. If you mess up, all your friends get to share in your punishment.”

“Oh, I don’t have a whole lot of friends. Everyone thinks I’m a snob because my parents are so high up in the community social ladder. I have a few people I associate with, but mainly because my parents are friends with their parents. It’s one of the primary benefits of having powerful parents.”

Margaret studied her new acquaintance carefully. She looked like a quiet, and innocent young woman, but after talking with her for a few moments, Margaret had already obtained a feel for her. Extremely sarcastic, but undeniably honest, the girl seemed rather friendly. Still, she had a dismal sense of humor, and gave the opinion of a pessimist.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re too thrilled with your parents.”

“Well, to be honest,” answered the girl. “I don’t mind them, they’re pretty decent parents. I just can’t wait to get away from here. Someplace where they can’t order the criminal records on any guy I try to date.”

“I think I’m starting to see the picture,” assured Margaret. “They don’t approve of your boyfriend.”

“They won’t even give him a chance. They say he’s too old for me and that I should look for a guy who’s going places. I don’t want a guy who’s going places, I want Shane. He’s stable, he’s faithful, and he’s the only person who understands me and got to know me for who I was, not who my parents are.”

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“It’s way beyond a ‘liking’ relationship. We have something really special, but they do whatever they can to keep us apart. I don’t want to lose him.”

The girl stopped for a moment and set down her book. She looked out at the park. The surroundings had a peaceful feeling with only the chatter of sprinklers disrupting the silent morning air.

“I shouldn’t be laying my whole life story on a stranger,” uttered the girl. “I’m sorry, the last thing you probably want to hear on your vacation is my sob story. I must sound so pathetic to you. You don’t even know me.”

“I might not know you,” answered Margaret, “but I know a lot about parents. That’s the funny thing about parents, they don’t ever seem to want to let go. Everybody gets the feelings you have, even me. There’s just something about leaving the town you grew up in right after school is over. Everybody wants to start new where nobody knows their name and they can live by their own rules. It’s really nice to meet somebody I have something in common with.”

“So what are you doing sitting in this park during your vacation?” the girl asked Margaret.

“I was just trying to decide what I was going to do for the rest of the day. I’m trying to learn a little about the area. Today I’m exploring the mall. You can get a pretty good feel for an area by shopping its mall. If you want to, it would be nice to have somebody who knows the area joining me?”

“Sure,” answered Carol. “That sounds like great fun. My father’s in the office right across the street. Let me just go let him know that I’m leaving and we can head over there now.”

“Great,” answered Margaret as she stood up from the bench and walked over with the girl to the building. She buried the journal deep in her bag and waited on the sidewalk for her new friend to emerge from the building. She knew the girl could give her all sorts of information that she needed.

Margaret returned home about seven that evening. Her aunt had already begun dinner and she joined her in setting the table. Her uncle still worked outside with the horses and there were several minutes until the meal was done.

“So how was your exploration of the city?” her aunt asked as the smell of fresh baked bread came rushing from the open oven.

“It was truly a learning experience. I was able to see much of the town’s older side today. I stopped in the library to research some of the city’s past. It was extremely eye opening.”

“Well that’s wonderful to hear, Margaret. You always did find ways to make the most out of your day. I never believed you last night when you said you were in limbo and just taking things one day at a time.”

“What do you mean?” Margaret asked with interest.

“I know you,” her aunt explained. “Some people like to sit around and dream, others like to put their dreams into action. Ever since you were a little child, you went after your dreams. You say you’re just relaxing and thinking about the future, but deep down, you really aren’t. You can’t.”

“So then, what am I doing?”

“Subconsciously, or maybe you realize that your doing it, but deep down, you plan your days to the minute. You set out each day with a list of goals. They don’t always have order, but there is some planning involved. You’re guided by a desire which won’t let you sit idly by thinking about things beyond your control. Your desire forces you to dominate the things you can control.”

“I don’t know, aunt Kate, I find myself dreaming about nonsense a lot of times. Maybe I’m not as determined as you think.”

“I disagree,” Kate defended her assessment. “I’ve always stood back and watched every one of you children. You have a lot of heart, Margaret. If you want to achieve great things, you will. I know a lot of people who sit around waiting for something to happen. You go out and make those things happen for you. You’re very independent.”

Margaret loved how her aunt could pick out the positive in a person’s character. She knew her aunt had a gift for understanding people after just a short conversation with them. She could easily judge whether she and a person were compatible as a friendship in just a few minutes. Most of all, she had a feel for people, and she found good in everyone.

Margaret often found herself amazed by how her aunt understood her more than Margaret understood herself. Her aunt had a talent for recognizing specific traits that a person couldn’t see in themselves. Her aunt’s intuition had always fascinated her.

“If you know so much about why I’m here,” Margaret began. “Then why don’t you tell me what I’m trying to do so that we both know.”

“Oh, Margaret,” her aunt assured her. “I don’t know what specifically you are trying to do. All I can say is that it’s something very important to you. I’ve never seen you as focused as you are on this visit. Even the summer you decided to build a cabin on the north end of the ranch. But I think you know what it is that you’re after.”

“Really?”

“Sure, Margaret. Most people would be a little bit more confused if they didn’t know what they were trying to accomplish. They would also wander around taking their time. You’re trying to do something right now. You might not know what it is yet, but something in the back of your mind does.”

The tension Margaret felt building up faded as her uncle walked in the backdoor. Margaret felt relieved, fearful that her aunt could see right through her and might suspect something. She had experienced deep conversations with her aunt before, but never felt that she had anything to hide.

It seemed odd to Margaret. Here was one woman who could truly help her sort through her own feelings, yet she guarded the information she had learned, and felt it was not the time to discuss it. She knew the presence of her uncle would return the conversation to a more casual manner.

Margaret ate her dinner and afterwards sat around reading some books for about an hour. The darkness outside began to cast a spell of sleep on her tired body and she decided to call it an evening. She bid her aunt and uncle goodnight and retired to the guestroom.

Margaret sat down on her bed and pulled out the journal from her bag. She had so much to write down in the book. She began by filling in the information she had learned while at the library. Then she started writing down what she had learned about her new friend.

“...Carol seems like a very nice girl. She is rather confused at this point in time, and very susceptible to outside points of view. Her background and family history have left her without any real close friends to express her feelings with.

Her parents have made a great mistake by discouraging her relationship with her boyfriend. I get the feeling that he was the only close friend she had ever known. The separation from him has left her deeply troubled. I was able to get her to open up some of her feelings to me today, and will make it a point to help her keep in contact with her boyfriend or find someone else in this area that she can rely on as a good friend.

I really like this girl. She has given me a great insight into the woman whom she calls mother. I can't wait to meet this woman. We have decided to spend the day together again tomorrow, and I will meet her at her home. There I expect to meet Heather for the first time. I have no idea how I will respond to her.

My friendship with Carol has made me forget many of my own troubles. I feel she is honestly in a worse situation than myself, and it makes me appreciate the family I was blessed to be raised in even more. It also makes me appreciate the friendship I have with Amy. I've even noticed some of the same qualities in Carol that I have always loved about Amy.

We ran into several women in the mall who Carol told me were friends of her mother's. Many of them thought that Carol and I were related. Carol told them no, but I had an urge to tell them yes. I have a feeling that it will be hard keeping quiet about Heather. I want people to know the truth, and I'm sure that in time, they will.

I felt guilty at first for using Carol, but have lost that sense since then. I feel I have something to offer Carol, even if it is only a caring ear to hear what she feels. I hope to retain her friendship in the years to come. She's a very nice girl.

I can't believe how quickly my plans have progressed this far. I've only been here a day, and tomorrow I will meet Heather, if she's home. I wonder how she'll react when we come face to face. It seems unbelievable that I'll be introduced to her tomorrow. Of course, lately, everything has seemed unbelievable to me.

There are so many things going through my head right now. I have learned so much about Heather through her daughter. I have a mental picture of her, and feel as if I have known her all my life. Carol pointed out some key attributes that I will use to get to know this woman better.

Heather sounds like a very busy woman who lives life to the fullest. She also sounds rather selfish and self-centered. Heather and Carol aren't close at all. It will be really interesting tomorrow to meet her..."

Chapter Ten

Margaret arrived at the house where her new friend lived just after eight thirty in the morning. The wind was still, and the morning air cool. She calmed herself before knocking on the door, but could still feel her heart beating heavily with anticipation.

The beauty of the large house astounded Margaret. It looked down upon the city from the hilltop where it sat. The other houses in the area were also very large and beautiful homes, but the huge dwelling dwarfed them in size.

Margaret knocked lightly on the door, not sure if all the occupants had yet awakened. She waited for several moments while excitement overcame her. The sound of footsteps nearing the other side of the door increased her level of anxiety.

The door opened and Margaret's eyes locked with the eyes of the intimidating figure. Margaret marveled at the beautiful woman who presented herself with such confidence. The woman cracked a small smile as she realized why Margaret was here.

"Hello," greeted the woman. "You must be Margaret. Please come in, we've heard a lot about you."

Heather wore a short dress suit which made her look rather professional, while at the same time displaying her well-maintained figure. It seemed odd to Margaret that she wore a suit during the summer, when she wasn't even working. Her haircut and make-up matched the professional look of her clothes and she carried herself with dignity.

"Thank you," answered Margaret. "You must be Carol's mother then."

"Oh, please call me Heather," The woman answered. "Carol's just upstairs in the bathroom putting her make-up on. You may feel free to go up and wait with her, or you can turn on the TV while you wait."

"All right," answered Margaret. She stood at the doorway for a minute, waiting for the woman to notice something about her and recognize who she was, but nothing happened. Heather had only glanced momentarily at her as she walked in and went right back to what she had involved herself with before the interruption.

Margaret didn't know what to do. She wasn't sure if she expected anything special to happen or not, but this woman hadn't noticed anything special about her. Her heart seemed to climb up into her throat, and she stood speechlessly waiting for something more. Margaret almost wanted to cry as she stood there, not sure if she wanted to step inside or run away.

She stood in the foyer, looking around the lavishly furnished home. The skylight in the ceiling filled the entrance with the morning's brightness. The light shone brightly off the glossy gray tiles which marked the floor on the inside of the door.

Heather turned around to see why the girl hadn't made a move since stepping inside the house. She felt a funny sensation as she realized Margaret just stared at her, and she decided to offer another suggestion.

"You could come into the kitchen and have a drink while you wait if you would like to."

Margaret realized she had made her host nervous with her staring and quickly snapped back to her senses. She smiled at Heather to ease the tension she had created.

"Sure, that sounds wonderful," she replied as she followed Heather to the kitchen.

"Would you like coffee?"

"No," answered Margaret. "Just a small glass of milk would be nice. I'm sorry to stare, I just thought you looked too young to have a daughter as old as Carol. You're a very pretty woman."

"Why thank you, Margaret," Heather replied, feeling the odd sensation quickly dissipate. "I had Carol when I was quite young. She's my first of three children."

"Let me guess, two boys?"

"Yeah," answered Heather. "They're twelve and ten. Carol's my little girl. She tells me you're in town for a visit with your aunt?"

"Correct. I just graduated a week ago and now I'm trying to make up my mind on just where I want to go to school."

Margaret continued to watch the woman as she sat at the kitchen table. She studied Heather carefully, trying to decide if the information she had obtained from Carol matched the woman correctly. Carol had read her mother quite well.

Margaret looked around the house, intrigued by the beautiful home. It didn't contain many humble features, decorated with great care, and probably professionally. The kitchen felt comfortable and elite at the same instant. Heather obviously took great pride in her home.

At the same time, Margaret continued to watch her host. It felt strange, realizing where she sat only two days into her vacation. She knew there was much more she could accomplish after making such quick progress in her search. Now she wanted to make the woman squirm.

Carol came down the stairs and entered the kitchen where Margaret sat. She smiled at her friend and then looked over at her mother. The look on her face changed slightly as her mother looked up at her.

"We're going to leave now," Carol informed her mother. "We'll probably stop by later this afternoon, but we'll be out most of the morning."

"All right, dear," Heather answered her daughter. "Do you mind dropping these papers off at your father's office. He left them on the kitchen table this morning and he needs them for a meeting he's scheduled."

"Do we have to?" Carol asked.

“Yes, dear, I have bridge this afternoon and I don’t have time to get it down to him this morning. Besides, your father would love to show your friend around the city offices. Margaret might be interested in that sort of thing.”

“Sure,” answered Margaret, eager to meet Todd Whitmore as well. “I’d love to look around the offices.”

Carol didn’t utter a word as she grabbed the papers and started off towards the car. Margaret thanked her host for the drink and followed her friend to the car. She looked back at the woman before walking out the door, hardly able to believe her eyes.

Margaret and Carol entered the city office building with the papers that they were to deliver to Carol’s father. They walked up to the receptionist at the front of the building, who immediately acknowledged Carol. Margaret realized that she knew Carol well.

“Welcome, Ms. Whitmore,” greeted the woman. “Dropping something off to your father?” She was an older and rather friendly woman who greeted the two girls with a smile.

“Yeah, he left some papers at home,” Carol answered.

Margaret looked around the old office building while waiting for Carol to continue. The building smelled old, with a solid wood interior inside an all brick structure. The drab gray colored tiles and musty odors made Margaret guess that the town had erected it in the early fifties.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever met you before,” expressed the receptionist to Margaret. She looked at the two girls for several seconds before responding. “I didn’t know you had an older sister, Carol.”

“Oh no, this isn’t my sister. This is Margaret, she’s a good friend of mine. She’s in town visiting for a few weeks.”

“You’re kidding me,” responded the receptionist. “You two look just like sisters. You have to be related.”

“No,” answered Carol with a smile. “But you’re not the only person who thinks that.”

The two girls continued past the woman and walked up the stairs to the third floor. Carol guided Margaret down the long hallway which led to her father’s office and walked through the door to the corner room. A secretary sat behind the desk, talking on the phone.

Margaret looked over at the woman as the two walked past her and towards the door which had the name Mayor Todd Whitmore written on it. Carol didn’t even look at the secretary as they walked past her, but Margaret paid particular attention to her.

The woman looked as if she was in her mid twenties and wore a loose, button down blouse and navy skirt. Something about the woman bothered Margaret. The girl looked back at Margaret with an odd expression which Margaret couldn’t quite decipher.

Margaret felt extremely uncomfortable as she walked into the room. The receptionist downstairs had seemed so friendly, but there were definitely some distinctly different feelings between the secretary and Carol.

Margaret followed Carol into the office. They closed the door behind them and sat down in the chairs across from the desk. The man inside the office had the chair turned away from the two girls and stared out the window at an old office building while talking on the phone with somebody. Carol waited patiently for the phone call to come to a close.

“Well hello, dear,” uttered the man as he turned around and hung up the phone. “What a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“You left these files on the kitchen table this morning,” uttered Carol without the same enthusiasm as her father. Margaret sensed some anger in Carol’s voice. “Mom thought you might need them for your meeting this afternoon.”

Todd took the papers from his daughter and looked them over carefully. Carol didn’t even crack a smile as she waited to make sure he had everything he needed. He didn’t pay any particular attention to her.

Glancing Todd over, Margaret could see how he and Heather had come to know one another. Todd and she looked and acted with the same manner. He wore very professional attire and presented himself very clean and well groomed. Everything about him looked intimidating and he had taken good care of his health.

“Who’s your new friend here?” he asked as he looked up and smiled at his daughter. Something about the look on his face as he smiled bothered Margaret. His expressions reminded her of somebody, but she couldn’t place who it was. She could tell that he used his social clout to overwhelm and control those around him. Margaret felt completely uncomfortable as he stared at her.

“This is Margaret,” answered Carol, the sound of her voice changing to a much friendlier tone. “She’s in town for a few weeks visiting her aunt and uncle.”

“Well, that’s just great. How do you like our little town, Margaret?”

“It’s a very interesting place,” Margaret answered. “Never a dull moment. You’re daughter and I are having a great time together. She’s been showing me around.”

“Well wonderful,” he answered, returning to his papers. “I hope you enjoy your visit.”

“Is that everything you’ll be needing, dad?” Carol asked, almost irritated at him.

“Yeah, dear, this looks like everything,” he answered. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a busy agenda planned for the day.”

Todd called his secretary over the intercom from his office. “Ms. Abrams, could you come in here, please. I have an urgent memo I need to take care of before this afternoon’s meeting.”

The secretary opened the door and walked into the office before Margaret or Carol had the opportunity to get up from their seats. Carol didn't even look up at the woman as she stood up to leave. Margaret, however, wanted to know what had happened here. She paid particular attention to Todd as the woman entered his office.

Margaret got a strange feeling as she watched the tremendous smile that he greeted the woman with. She could almost read his thoughts as the woman walked past Carol without even the slightest nod of acknowledgment. The woman returned the same look to Margaret that she had experienced in the waiting room.

Margaret suddenly realized whom Todd reminded her of. Jeremy exercised many of the same gestures and facial expressions when he talked. As she watched Todd, she began to feel angry. Todd was a manipulator, and she had never realized that Jeremy was the same way. A sick feeling crept over her.

Margaret walked by as if nothing had happened, following her friend out the door. She turned around to close the door behind her and noticed the woman standing to the side of the mayor's desk, leaning over the desk to look at the papers. The loose blouse she wore hung down low, almost touching the desk and destroying any false sense of modesty.

Margaret closed the door and followed her friend who had already left the secretary's office and quickly walked partially down the hall. Margaret turned before leaving and dropped her purse in one of the chairs in the waiting room to the mayor's office. She closed the outside office door behind her, and then hurried to catch up to Carol down the hall.

"Your dad seems really busy," acknowledged Margaret, trying to break the tension as Carol continued her quick pace.

"Yeah, when you're that powerful, you hardly have any time to waste. I'm sorry he ignored you like that. He isn't the most friendly person unless he's up for reelection."

"You don't have to apologize for your dad. I understand how busy he is. We were just coming down to drop off some papers. It isn't like we came to have him give us a full tour of the city or anything."

"You know," began Carol. "It wasn't until his second term that I even knew this was the building where his office was. Then it was only because one of my friends, whose mother works here, showed me where it was."

"Maybe if you made it more apparent that you were interested in his job, he would take the time to show you around?"

"That's the thing," expressed Carol. "I'm not interested in his job, I'm just interested in getting to know my father better. He doesn't give me the time of day. I don't want to have to butter him up by telling him how great it is that he's the mayor just to get an appointment to talk with him."

“I see your point,” answered Margaret. The two girls had almost reached the front doors of the old building when Margaret stopped suddenly. “Oh shut! I left my purse on the chair in the secretary’s office. I should run back up and get it.”

“Can you find your way all right?” Carol questioned.

“I think so,” Margaret answered. “Do you just want to wait outside for me. I should only be a minute.”

“I’ll be over in the park waiting.”

Margaret left her friend and ran back into the building towards the vicinity of the mayor’s office. She caught her breath as she neared the outside office door, wondering if her hunch was correct. She opened the door quietly, peeking inside to see if the secretary had come back to her desk.

The desk remained empty, and her bag still lay where she had left it. She retrieved the bag and walked over to the mayor’s door, leaning her ear up against the door. She could clearly make out low moans coming from inside.

Margaret decided she had to assure herself that the sounds were what she suspected. She twisted the knob of the door very slowly and cracked it just slightly, so that she could see inside the office.

The secretary had her back turned to Margaret, and she obstructed the mayor’s view of the doorway. Margaret pushed the door open farther to get a good look at the two of them.

Margaret watched for only a second, before the shock of the situation caused her to look away. She could see the secretary’s skirt up around her waist, and no clothing covering her below that. She could see only Todd’s silhouette behind the woman, but didn’t need to see any more to confirm her suspicions.

From the sounds that the couple made, it appeared that this was no first time occurrence. Both exercised no hesitation, and the two different pitches of voice seemed to sing a harmony as they shared their intimacy.

Margaret closed the door and walked back towards the outer door, noticing the notepad still sitting on the secretary’s desk. She smiled as she slammed the door to the hallway and hurried to join her companion down in the park. Things were turning out greater than she ever imagined.

Margaret found Carol on the same park bench where they had first met. Carol seemed nervous as Margaret walked up and sat down beside her. A strange feeling came over her as she sat there with her friend and she knew they needed to break the silence.

Margaret pulled Carol to her feet and led her away from the park. She knew the visit had upset Carol, and she wanted to enjoy the rest of the day. She made a point to get away from the building quickly, and get Carol’s mind on something else.

The two girls spent the rest of the day together browsing around town and finding fun things to burn up the day. They walked around town while Carol pointed out some of the landmarks in the small city. Carol told Margaret that Heather had to leave town for a few days to visit some friends and she would take Carol's brothers with her.

The two girls planned to take advantage of the time by themselves and use the unoccupied house during the days. Margaret had started to feel a closeness to Carol. She knew in her heart that they were actually sisters. As the older sister, she wanted to help Carol with her social life. She talked Carol into attending a youth dance that the school district held to keep the local kids busy.

Margaret retired to her room quite late in the evening. She had missed dinner with her aunt and uncle to attend the evening dance with Carol. She immediately opened her journal, eager to write down the events of the day.

"...I've just returned from a dance in town. I realize now why Carol has so few friends here. She is extremely shy around other kids her age. I believe that this coupled with her parents' social status has led people to believe she is a snob.

I was able to start some conversations with some really nice people at the dance. I even got Carol into the conversations and feel she's making progress by letting down the barriers she has built and allowing some of her peers to get to know her. Her attitude seems to be that if she doesn't make any friends, she doesn't have to worry about losing them. She seems really worried that people won't like her. She is truly a remarkable girl and I hope that I can help some of the other girls her age realize how nice she is.

We talked a little bit tonight about Carol's boyfriend. She even showed me a picture of the guy that she hides from her parents. Her mother won't even acknowledge the guy. I feel bad for Carol. He sounds like a really nice guy and he's treated her quite well. She seems really smart in the decisions she has made. I'm really anxious to meet him, but it doesn't sound like he gets to visit much. She writes him every day and keeps her own private mailbox at the post office so her parents can't intercept her mail.

I also learned today that Todd Whitmore is having an affair with his secretary. I've met women like her before. She's a total home wrecker. She gave me a look while I was visiting today that made me wonder if something was going on. I could tell by her actions that she was proud of what she was doing.

The woman didn't try to hide anything from Carol or me. It was as if she was advertising the affair going on between them. I'm not sure if Carol realizes it or not. I think she just wants her father to treat her like a daughter, and not just another constituent. She might not have even noticed the signs that the secretary is flagrantly flashing.

Seeing Todd today made me angry. I'm angry at myself, and I'm angry at Jeremy. I'm angry at all guys like Jeremy. It wasn't until I watched Todd today that I realized how blind I was while I dated Jeremy. The two of them are so alike.

The whole time I dated Jeremy, he was showing signs that he might be unfaithful, but I chose to ignore them. It upsets me even more to realize that I got involved with somebody who's just like the man who married my mother. I guess that maybe we're more alike than I care to acknowledge. That disgusts me, and it scares me at the same time.

I decided before I came here that I would find some way to leave an impression on Heather's life, and try to make her life unbearable, so she can understand what I went through. It looks as if her husband is taking care of these things for me already. He's so careless in how he's handling his affair, that she's bound to find out quite soon.

I also got a chance to listen to Heather this afternoon. Carol and I returned from our shopping trip during a bridge game they were having. We sat in the kitchen eating sandwiches while eavesdropping on the conversation in the living room. Carol is extremely light hearted in her play. She mimicked her mother several times while we listened in. She knows her mother quite well.

Heather seems to live for one thing, and that's recognition. She thrives on her popularity and the network of high class citizens she associates with. I understand why many of Carol's friends think she's a snob, they've probably met her mother and figure they're both alike. Carol is just the opposite.

Heather sets a high standard on materialistic wealth. Her children are wonderful, but she seems more interested in displaying them than taking an interest in their lives. She has a wonderful daughter and the two younger brothers seem really nice. She seems to have buried her secrets deep down inside her. She isn't like what I pictured for a woman who would abort her own baby.

Heather displays her family like a trophy. She's really proud of her husband and what he has become. I wonder if she would be as proud if she realized that he was having an affair with his secretary. This whole family seems to be full of surprises. I don't know what I will do next. Every day I find more dirt to use against Heather, but in the condition her life is right now, I don't know if I'll even need to do a thing..."

The next two days passed quickly. Margaret and Carol spent one afternoon swimming at the city pool, and laid around watching television while devouring ice cream at Carol's house. Todd was hardly ever home, and the two girls enjoyed goofing off and playing pool in the basement. That evening, they watched videos with several other teens from around town. Margaret felt pleased with the evening. She had forced Carol to invite some people over. Carol

seemed to enjoy the evening as well, and she appeared more comfortable than Margaret thought she would. It made Margaret glad to see Carol coming out of her shell. The entire night was a success.

The following day, Margaret woke up and rode the horses at her aunt and uncle's house for the majority of the morning. She used the time to try to decide her next move when Heather came home. In the afternoon, Carol and Margaret went out with several other girls they had met at the dance, and had complete makeovers done. She knew that she would have the evening to herself.

Margaret finished dinner with her relatives and prepared to head into town. Carol had a baby-sitting job, which her mother had forced her to take for a friend, so Margaret had to spend the night alone. Her aunt and uncle always played cards with some of their neighbors on this day of the week, and though they had invited her to come along, she declined.

Margaret decided to go into town and fool around with her new camera a bit. She picked up several roles of film from a local retailer and loaded her camera with it. The sun had begun to fall behind the horizon, and she wanted to make it into the city before it got too dark.

Margaret climbed in her car and drove around town looking for some interesting sites to photograph. She had hardly taken any pictures with her new treasure, and wanted to see what it could do. She drove past the city building and noticed Todd's car parked in his stall. Carol had told her that he had to work late and she decided to investigate it further.

She drove down the road to the farmer's market and parked her car in the barren parking lot. She pulled out the duffel bag from the seat beside her and began the walk towards the city building.

Margaret reached the street which the city building sat along and decided to take an alternate route. She walked a half block down and found an alley which ran behind the buildings on the block. The end of the alley opened up to the park, and she knew it would lead her to Todd's window.

Margaret entered the alley, and checked to make sure she was alone. The alley had become a breeding ground for garbage and rubble. It felt creepy as she walked past the old buildings, unsure of what lurked in the shadows.

Margaret hurried down the dark alley, and found a fire escape on the back of the building which sat across from Todd's window. The owners had abandoned the building long ago and boarded it up. A sign on the back entrance prohibited entry and explained that the building was scheduled for demolition in a few more weeks.

She threw the bag over her shoulder and jumped up to the scaffolding, using her strength gained from mountain climbing to pull herself up onto the second level of the escape. Margaret

climbed up the old metal stairs to the third level of the escape and found an unlocked, old window.

She placed a hand against the glass and tried to get her fingers beneath the bottom as she pushed the weathered window up to gain entry into the building. The rusted frame fought with her, but soon gave way to her unrelenting strength.

Darkness had set in on the city at this hour, and the city dwellers had abandoned the downtown area. This older area of town had fallen prey to the shift towards large scale shopping centers. The years of overcrowding and forsaking management had caused the block of apartment buildings, so close to the center of town, to become unsuitable for living, and too costly for renovation. Only an occasional car driving down the empty streets left any signs of life.

The city council hoped to replace the old structures with newer office buildings. They hoped to revitalize this part of town somehow and create some sort of equilibrium. The block of aged structures sent property value in the area plummeting and continued to force more of the businesses to move out.

Margaret slipped through the window and stepped onto the floor. The smell of rotten wood and mildew filled the air inside and she could taste the dust forced into the air by improperly sealed windows. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she stood there allowing her eyes to adjust to the light.

The previous owners of the apartment had cleared it of their belongings, which made walking through the dark room fairly easy. She reached the doorway to the master bedroom and opened it, making her way towards the window.

The window of the bedroom sat directly across from the mayor's office. The old glass of the window had lost its clarity, and Margaret had to force it quietly open to get a clear glimpse inside the mayor's office.

Margaret could tell that the mayor didn't worry about somebody spying on him from the old building. From the ground below, all one could see was the ceiling of his office, but from this vantage point, she could see almost the entire office.

Margaret had forced the window open about six inches. She welcomed the odor of the fresh air from outside as the gentle breeze poured into the room. The carpet inside the old room had become water logged from leaks in the ceiling, and it made a mushy noise beneath her feet. It was a large room, empty of any obstacles and a perfect breeding ground for the mildew which drenched the floor.

Margaret ignored the stench seeping from the floor and concentrated on the view of the mayor's office. The window where she stood was approximately forty feet away from his office window and the ground below looked uninhabited at this late hour.

A chain link fence surrounded the city office, a remnant from years past when less desirable people inhabited the old apartments. A lush amount of thick grass covered the grounds of the city office. The mayor's office wasn't the only office with lights on this evening. Another office on the second floor also had its lights on, but all Margaret could see was the unoccupied desk from her angle.

The sight before her didn't surprise Margaret as she looked across through the mayor's window. Todd was in the middle of a meeting with a woman city council member. Tonight's agenda was apparently pleasure, and not business.

Margaret opened the window farther, so she could see over the desk which obstructed her view. Articles of clothing covered the office, thrown about during the ruckus which had led to this event.

Todd and the woman were on the floor near the door and wrapped around one another. Their naked bodies moved fluently over the expensive carpet of the office as they rolled around in a frenzy.

Margaret dropped down and opened up the bag, removing the camera and setting up for the shot. Her quarry seemed too careless and simple, he made it so easy for her. His punctuality and reliability were sickening, but she almost expected it.

In less than a minute, she had gone through the whole role of film, obtaining many pictures which she felt would make a definite impression. She returned the camera to the bag and quietly left the room. She moved slowly as she crept away from the building. She knew the trouble she could get into if someone caught her snooping around with a camera.

Margaret's heart pounded as she scurried down the alley, listening for any signs of life in the deserted area. She wondered to herself why she had taken such a risk, but found herself enjoying the thrill of catching the moment on film. By the time she reached her car, she was laughing aloud.

Heather Whitmore sat at the kitchen table of her home, preparing a small salad for her lunch. The quiet afternoon allowed her to relax around the home and she had sent her kids out on errands so she could enjoy some time alone. She heard footsteps coming up the back porch steps to the screen door and looked up to find Margaret knocking lightly against the hard rod iron door.

Heather had just returned home this morning after a two day visit to one of her friends from college. During the time while she was away, Margaret and Carol had spent most of their time together. Margaret had grown accustomed to the large home with the vast amount of time she had spent there lately, and even learned a shortcut there through the backyard. She had almost forgotten that Heather would be home.

“Hello,” uttered Margaret. “Remember me?”

“Of course, Margaret, come on inside. Carol isn’t here right now, I sent her down to the store for a gallon of milk. I expect her back any time. Come on in, you’re welcome to wait if you’d like.”

“Yes, Mrs. Whitmore. I would really enjoy that.”

Margaret sat down across the table from Heather. She felt funny looking at the woman when she knew so much about her. For the past few days she had done some digging into Heather’s past, but there were still questions she needed answers for.

“So, Margaret, how are you enjoying your vacation so far?” Heather asked, trying to make small talk.

“It’s been really enlightening. I never thought that I would see as much as I’ve seen since I arrived. It feels more like a learning experience than a vacation.”

“It must be really exciting to think that you’ll be starting college this fall. Are you excited to get out on your own?”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Margaret had never seen this side of Heather before. She wore a pair of shorts and a loose T-shirt and didn’t look as if she wanted to impress anyone. All the other times Margaret had seen her, Heather wore very fashionable and exquisite clothing.

“I bet you can’t wait to get out and date some college guys too,” Heather smirked as she winked at Margaret.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind playing the field a little bit.”

“That’s the way to do it, Margaret,” Heather said in an experienced tone of voice. “There are a whole lot of streams emptying into that big pond. You ought to swim up a few and taste the waters of each. That’s the only way you end up with a trout and not a carp.”

“That’s a pretty interesting analogy, Mrs. Whitmore. I didn’t know you liked to fish.”

“I like to think of myself as a versatile person. I enjoy being a housewife and camping with some friends once in a while.”

“Your husband seems to be a pretty good catch.”

“Yeah, he’s the big fish in the pond.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Margaret asked in a reserved manner.

“Sure, Margaret.”

“How did you meet Mr. Whitmore?”

“We met in school. He and I dated off and on while we were in high school. We knew we were right for each other, but we had to test our relationship to be sure.”

“Why was that?”

“You want to be sure that you’ve found the right man before you make any strong commitments. Sometimes the only way to know you’re with the right person is to break things off for a while.”

Margaret could sense that Heather enjoyed giving advice on relationships.

“When did you know for sure that you wanted to spend your life with Mr. Whitmore?” Margaret asked, acting the part of the mystified admirer, while trying to gain more information.

“It wasn’t until the very last football game of our senior year. Before that, I thought I could live without him. He had really upset me earlier in the year. We had a fight, and were both bullheaded. We split up for a few weeks.

“Then at our last home game, he ran in the winning touchdown, and I knew I had to get him back. I approached him that night on main street when everyone was partying. The whole school was out there. Everyone was celebrating because he’d gotten us into the state tournament.”

“There were probably many girls out there who wanted him, huh?” Margaret played along.

“Yeah,” answered Heather, “but I decided he was mine. I wasn’t going to let it end. When you find a guy as great as Todd, you’ll do what it takes to get him. It didn’t take much,” she smiled boastfully, “he wanted me back also. Then I knew that we were made for one another. I wasn’t going to let him get away from me again. From then on, we just understood one another. He’s a wonderful man.”

“You make it sound so perfect.”

“It has been wonderful.”

“It seems like every relationship has some rocky points in it,” spoke Margaret unconvinced. “I can only imagine how hard it is to juggle all the responsibilities you and he have. You’re both so important to the community. There must be a lot of pressure.”

“When you find the right man, problems don’t seem to have any meaning anymore.”

“So the time you were apart, neither of you dated anyone else?”

“I never stopped dating,” Heather spoke in an almost defensive tone. “He was seeing somebody when we decided to get back together, but those people didn’t matter to either of us. We still wanted to be together. We both remained faithful to the idea that we might be together again.”

“That sounds so romantic,” Margaret sighed. “I’ve never had a relationship like that.”

“You’re still young, you have lots of time to find a guy who’ll be as good to you as Todd’s been to me.”

“I don’t know,” Margaret continued, playing into the little charade, “I just got out of a relationship where I thought we were meant for each other, and then I found out he’s been seeing

other girls the whole time we were going out. I always thought I could trust him, but he deceived me.”

“Don’t worry too much about guys like that. You’ll run into one from time to time. I dated a few of them in my day. After a while, you get to a point where you can pick them out. Then you just avoid them, or beat them at their own game.”

“I just don’t like knowing that I got walked on.”

“Learn from your mistakes,” Heather explained. “You have to look out for the signs. Then, if you think a guy might try to walk on you, make sure he knows before hand that you won’t stand for it. If you find out he’s already cheated on you, walk away and don’t look back.”

“I don’t ever want it to get that far into a relationship and find out I’ve been cheated on again. I wish I could see the signs better than I do, so I could tell if there’s a chance he would cheat on me before hand. I don’t want to have to worry about it.”

“You’re right,” answered Heather. “That was the thing I liked most about Todd. I knew I would never have to worry about him. He’s so involved with his family and making the city a better place, I don’t think the thought could ever cross his mind.”

“I think I’ll take a break from the social scene for a while.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Heather uttered as she looked up from her salad that she had finished preparing. “If you just drop out of the dating game, you’ve let your boyfriend win.”

“But I don’t want anything to do with him again.”

“No, you shouldn’t go back,” Heather agreed, “but don’t let a bad experience stop you.”

“What would you do?”

“I had ways of dealing with instances such as yours in my youth.”

“What would you have done?”

“I would have gone after someone just like him.”

“Why?”

“To settle the score. You can’t go back to your boyfriend to seek your revenge, but you can find someone just like him.”

“What good would that do?” Margaret asked intently.

“It allows you to work out your resentment on someone who probably deserves it, and rebuild your self esteem. Then you can look at it as a clean slate.”

“But how do you get even?”

“You let him think you’re the lamb, and make him think you don’t know anything about his game. Guys like that get so wrapped up in themselves and the control that they have in their relationships. Let him feel comfortable, then take control. Make him feel powerless to you, and then move in for the kill. You destroy guys like that by destroying their ego, but first you have to make them lower their defenses.”

“You sound like a pro at this,” Margaret said with a smile.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve played the game, but I was pretty good at it in my day.”

“So what did it feel like when you met Todd? How did you know that he wasn’t one of these guys?”

“When you find the right guy, everything changes,” answered Heather. “Ever since the night Todd won our final football game, my life has been like a dream. We went to the state championships and won every game we played. We took the state title, and Todd got into college on a scholarship. It allowed us to get married his first year of college.”

“How did he get involved in politics?”

“He always wanted to make a difference in people’s lives. It wasn’t very long after we got back from college that he was running for office.”

“So why did you get married so young?”

“It never seemed like we were that young. We were on cloud nine the whole time we were together. We had our lives planned out once we knew he had landed the football scholarship. We just felt invincible. I don’t know how else to describe it, except that it all seems so unreal. We weren’t afraid of anything. We took what we wanted and didn’t care what others thought. We were making plans to get married before we had even finished high school.”

“How did he propose?”

“Todd proposed to me on our graduation night.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him yes without any hesitation. I knew right then that he was who I wanted to spend my life with. He filled practically every void I needed in my life.”

“Still, you were awfully young. Do you ever regret getting married that early?”

“No,” answered Heather. “We enjoyed college. It practically paid for itself. Then we came back to town and everybody knew our names. There weren’t very many kids our age who had a college degree. We had all sorts of respect. We did well in the furniture business until he built up a name for himself. He ran for city council three years after we graduated, and worked his way up to mayor.”

“So there isn’t anything you ever did in your life that you regret?”

“No,” answered Heather plainly. “I can’t think of a single thing I would change if I had it all to do over again. I can’t imagine any way that I could improve it. I look at my life as some kind of fairy tale. Todd’s my handsome prince and I’ve lived happily ever after.”

“Wow,” Margaret spoke, her eyes dreamy. “I hope that I can look back at my life with that kind of feeling of accomplishment. I can’t wait to meet the right guy and get married. I hope I can be as good of a mother and wife as you are to your family.”

The conversation had begun to make Margaret feel sick. She had never met somebody so wrapped up in herself before, but still she pressed on, wanting to see her reaction to the questions. She went on, pretending to enjoy listening to Heather describe her life.

“Oh Margaret, come on now,” Heather smiled over at her. “It looks like your mother’s done an excellent job of raising you. You must have had a pretty good role model as a parent.”

“Yeah,” assured Margaret. “You just seem to have it all. You’re successful in the community, your husband is incredible and you’ve raised a wonderful family. You balance everything so well, I just don’t understand how you do it all.”

“You can do anything, if you want it bad enough and put your mind to it,” explained Heather. “You’re so young, and you have your whole life to make a mark in this world, but I can already tell that you’re going to make it big, Margaret.”

“I plan to dedicate my life to science.”

“Why’s that?” Heather asked with interest.

“I was somewhat thrown into it.”

“Well that’s impressive, Margaret. Science isn’t an easy field to go into. It’s nice to see young people interested in something which is so challenging. I wish I could get Carol to start thinking of what field she wants to pursue.”

“She has other interests,” urged Margaret.

“Yeah, and he’s two years older than she is. I wish she would take interest in something other than extra-curricular activities.”

“Perhaps she just looks at how well you did for yourself and wants to be like her mother.”

“Well, my husband wasn’t enlisted in the military.”

“You don’t like her dating a guy who’s in the military?”

“Not particularly.”

“Why not?” asked Margaret intently.

“I’ve heard all sorts of stories about men in the military,” explained Heather. “They’re always having affairs with women while their wives sit home unexpectedly, or they beat their wives. I don’t want her to become one of those women.”

“She seems like she has her head on pretty straight,” Margaret defended her young friend. “I think she’s watching out for herself.”

“I just don’t want her to have to settle for second best. She can do better than him. I want her life to have as much meaning as mine did. It’s something about when you have your own children. You want the best for them and you’ll do whatever it takes, no matter what the cost. I want her to be able to marry a man just like her father.”

“I don’t wish to argue with you,” Margaret began carefully, “but if you make it harder for her to see him, she’s just going to try harder to keep seeing him.”

“I just don’t know if I can trust her to watch out for herself.”

“Everybody makes a mistake once in a while.”

“I know, but it would be really hard on her since her father’s the mayor of the city. There are so many nicer guys out there she should be seeing.”

“You’re right,” answered Margaret, realizing this was a touchy subject and deciding to back off, “but I think that you’ll find out things will take care of themselves in time. She’s a bright girl, and she’ll make the right decisions.”

“I hope you’re right,” answered Heather.

“I believe she has her mother’s good senses,” Margaret complimented her unsuspecting quarry.

“Well thank you, Margaret,” Heather answered without blushing. “You’re a good friend to Carol. She’s never really had a close friend before. I wish she looked at the guys she dated the same way you do. You’re a really good role model for her.”

Margaret returned home early in the evening and sat down to play cards with her aunt and uncle. The group stayed up quite late talking about the family gossip. She felt glad finally to have some time to spend with the older couple. She knew they didn’t mind that she didn’t spend much time there, but still felt guilty she hadn’t spent much time with them.

Margaret retired to her room early into the morning. Her mind was already overwhelmed with thoughts she wanted to get down on paper. She wrote about the events of the day, and went into detail explaining her talk with Heather.

“...Lately I’ve been thinking about Jeremy. I tried to put him out of my mind, but the scene I witnessed with Todd Whitmore brought back bad memories of the last time I saw him.

During my talk with Heather today, I learned a lot about how she views life in general. I must say that I have never met such a proud woman in all my life. Her snobbery and egotistical view of herself literally makes me gag. I thought at first that she might have come across badly to me, but the more I get to know her, the more I realize how precise my original feelings about her were.

I asked her what she thought I should do about Jeremy. I don’t really plan to get back together with him, but I wanted her opinion on things. I wanted to see how she would handle a situation like mine.

Heather told me she thought I should get even with someone else just like him. I don’t usually handle things this way, but perhaps she’s right. Maybe I should find someone who just uses people and destroy him. Somebody just like her husband. It’s funny how she doesn’t even realize what’s going on.

Through watching her talk with her friends, who are just a group of women who seem to worship the ground she walks on, I've realized she has built this little make-believe world which she lives in. She does a pretty convincing job of making people believe that she's a model citizen.

Looking through her home, she has many awards from local organizations which honor her as a wonderful person. I really wonder what people would think if they knew about her past. I wonder what sort of award she would get recognized for if they knew she had three abortions before getting married.

I was able to squeeze a lot of information out of her today about her family. She looks at her entire life as some kind of fairy tale. It's funny, but you never see Cinderella run off to get an abortion before she finally shacks up with her prince. Of course, you never hear about the prince romping around with everyone else in the land afterwards either.

I think I have grown to understand why she aborted me, as well as the two children before me. She sounds as if she always lived her life to please one person, the only one who mattered to her, herself.

Meeting her and seeing how disgustingly perfect of a life she pretends to have, makes me really angry. She hasn't said an unkind word to me since the first time I saw her, but I have never met anybody who I can honestly say I detest more.

I can't wait to show her how wrong she is about her husband. Her life was a lie in the past, and it still is today. It makes me feel terrible to think how much I am just like her. My whole life is a lie, and I really want to get even with Jeremy. I actually find myself wanting to take her advice. I want to get even with someone who just uses people. I want to destroy one of these people, and then I want to destroy Heather.

Her life was so important to her, she decided that ending mine was the easy way out. She figured that I would be a burden, and ruin her life and dreams. She thought I would come between her and this fairy tale life she pretends to live. Well, I'll show her how correct she is. I'll make her life as miserable as she originally dreamed I would. As a matter of fact, I'll make it even worse..."

Chapter Eleven

Margaret climbed out of bed late the next morning. She had gone to sleep quite late the night before and knew she needed some rest. She awoke refreshed, but a little disturbed. Strange and erotic thoughts had wandered up from the depths of her mind and haunted her dreams in a creepy fashion. Visions of Jeremy, and events from the past that she held as fond memories, crept out of the places she had buried them. Once unleashed to the freedom of her mind, the dreams took a terrible turn, becoming twisted and disturbing.

The dreams had enticed her imagination, and indeed she felt quite relaxed from the arousals of her sleep, but the dream soon changed drastically. Margaret vividly recalled one dream in particular, unleashing memories of a time when she and Jeremy shared a passionate and uninhibited evening of exploration.

The sight of his face, beads of sweat dripping down his cheeks and breathing heavily unleashed itself to her thoughts. The dream felt so real, as though she could feel his skin on her own, and his gentle kisses driving her insane as she held him closer, never wanting to let him go. Then she closed her eyes, unable to keep focused as the intensity overpowered her, but upon opening them, the dream took on a horrifying picture, as she found it was no longer Jeremy whom she shared this intimate moment with.

“Ouch...” Margaret said aloud as she pinched herself. She stared directly into the mirror, waiting for the water in the sink to cool. Seconds later, she leaned over and splashed the brisk water across her face, washing away the thoughts and awakening fully. Margaret wanted nothing more than to forget about the visions of her sleep.

The dreams didn’t really surprise Margaret. Her last thoughts as she drifted off were of her plans to get back at Heather for the act she had committed. She had toyed with the idea of using Todd as a tool in her scheme, but didn’t think he would make his way into her subconscious thoughts. She still had nothing solid to use against Heather, but several ideas had crossed her mind.

The most promising thing she could conjure was to somehow bring Heather back together with the man whom she had shared that blissful event with almost eighteen years ago. She wanted to see Heather squirm, pulling her down off her pedestal. She knew that by bringing the former lover back out of the closet, she could cause some major tension in the household. It was a start.

The cold water started to take effect on her, and her senses widened to her present state. She removed the night shirt she had worn to bed, exposing her nakedness in the large bathroom

mirror. She dropped the shirt to the floor, staring at the mirror as she did, and a sickening feeling started to form in the center of her unsettled stomach.

Margaret remained focused on herself, feeling belittled and undignified. It hurt to think that she had to look with shame at herself, and knew that it was unhealthy to see herself in such a manner. Watching herself undress brought back an anger she hadn't felt in some time. She couldn't believe the things she had done to please Jeremy and his wild fantasies. Sometimes the pleasure a partner gains doesn't balance out the embarrassment it causes the other person in the process.

Jeremy often requested that Margaret undress before him, and in the beginning, she thought that she enjoyed it. He would sometimes join in the fun, making it a carefree experience. In time, however, the request occurred more frequently, and he stopped treating her with respect while she revealed herself to him. He would make crude remarks, making her feel ashamed and nasty. The love making ended there, and she would finish undressing only to satisfy his desire, hoping that later he would make up for it.

Margaret had never realized his manipulation and use of control until they were watching a movie one evening when his parents were away. It was an erotic film, or so he thought, but she didn't see it the same way. As she watched the man command his lover in a cold tone to undress, she realized the similarities to her own relationship. That was the night she realized that she and Jeremy would never last, and an end would someday come.

It's funny how after you break up with someone, that all you remember is their faults, she thought to herself. They had shared some wonderful moments, and he usually treated her with respect, but their relationship's awful ending made it easy to remember the bad. In time, she quit undressing for him, much to his dissatisfaction. Margaret didn't like him making her feel like a tramp. The movie, and the scene from it, remained permanently imprinted on her mind.

She decided to have breakfast before attempting a shower. Her stomach felt incredibly empty, and she wanted to settle it with a full meal. She pulled her robe off the rack behind her, covering up her bare skin. She cleared her mind of the memories, both good and bad, and took a deep breath. After she ate, the warm water from the shower head would wash the disturbing images from her body, but right now she needed food.

The house sounded quiet with abandonment this late in the morning. Her aunt and uncle had left her a note telling her that they had gone to a horse show. They had asked her if she wished to go the night before, but she declined pleasantly, telling them she had business to attend to.

The empty house was a pleasing sight to Margaret. She had run around so stressed the past several days, that she needed this time to herself. She frolicked around the home while

eating her breakfast, allowing the tension to drift aimlessly away. Almost two hours passed before she finally left the house to begin her day.

Margaret reached the library before noon, recognizing the same librarian at the front desk as on her last visit. The building seemed more utilized by the public this late in the morning. She decided to wander around and seek out the phone books by herself, not wishing to disturb the woman who looked deeply involved in the steamy novel she read. It didn't take long for her to locate the small shelf which housed the items she searched for.

The library had phone books from across the state. Margaret took a seat at the table nearest the shelf and pulled out the small map she had photocopied of the state. She walked over to the shelf and pulled out several books with listings near the town of Jefferson, the last location she knew of her father.

The time passed slowly as she first searched the white pages for the name of Greg Thompson. She didn't realize how common of a name Thompson was until she thumbed through the pages of countless Thompsons throughout the area. She knew that her efforts here might prove futile. Greg Thompson might choose not to list his number, or worse, he might live on the other side of the continent. Still, Margaret kept her optimism.

After studying the Jefferson phone book, Margaret looked through the books of the communities immediately surrounding the city. It was much later that she found the man's name in a community about fifty miles away from Jefferson, in a small town. He owned his own automobile repair shop.

Thompson Automobile Repair seemed like a large outfit from the ad that Greg Thompson had taken out in the business section. Margaret knew she needed to make sure he was the right person. Chances that this was the right man were slim, but she had a feeling about it as she looked down at the ad on the page.

Margaret pulled out her map and tried to figure out the distance from the auto shop to Harrison. It didn't look like more than an hour drive. With nothing to lose, Margaret decided that any lead she found was something. She carefully wrote down all the information she could find about the place, as well as this Greg Thompson's home phone number.

Margaret spent another hour looking through other phone books in the state, locating two more Greg Thompsons, probably related, as they lived in the same town. The home of these individuals sat at the other end of the state, and she knew it would take longer than an hour to get there. She decided Thompson Automobile Repair was probably her best lead, and planned out how she would follow it up. The clock showed noon as she walked out of the city library.

Several hours later, Margaret knocked on the Whitmore's front door. The sun's intensity made the temperature soar this afternoon until it felt almost unbearable. The immense heat

quickly reminded her that the air conditioning in her car needed recharging, but she had no desire to deal with long waits and crooked, egotistical repairmen on such an uncomfortable day. She desperately hoped that somebody was home at the house. Margaret felt lonely sitting home with no company and wanted to see Carol. Heather's car was gone, but her husband's Cadillac sat parked in the driveway.

The door finally opened and the blast of cool air from inside supplied her with a split second of relief as the differing air pressures equilibrated. Margaret stared up at the overbearing man who had answered it. It was Mayor Whitmore, and he gave her a half hearted smile as he looked down at her. She hated it when people smiled down on her like that.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mayor Whitmore, remember me?" Margaret asked with a smile.

"Refresh my memory," he uttered with a look of confusion. She didn't really expect him to, but he seemed interested in her now, just like a politician.

"I'm Margaret," she reminded him, sure that she would follow the same scenario the next time they met. "Your daughter introduced us a couple of days ago at your office."

"Oh yes," Todd spoke. "I'm sorry, I meet a lot of people. I apologize, please come in."

"Thank You," Margaret said as she stepped into the cooler environment inside the house.

"Carol went with her mother to the store," Todd explained to his young guest. "They should be back any moment now. You're welcome to wait in the living room if you'd like. I have some work to do in my office, so if you want to just make yourself at home, they should arrive anytime."

"All right," answered Margaret. "I think I'll take you up on that offer. It's just miserable outside."

She turned her back to the man and walked towards the familiar living room to wait for her friend's return. There was a slight pause before the door closed behind her, and she felt a cold sensation run up her spine as she realized that his eyes followed her across the room. What a sick man, she thought to herself, checking out his own daughter's friends.

"I'm just down the hall if you need anything," Todd informed her as he turned away and walked back towards his office. She turned around and watched him disappear down the hallway to the other end of the house. He whistled as he walked, an annoying and belittling whistle. Jeremy used to whistle all the time.

Margaret walked into the living room and sat down on one of the sofas. She pinched her shirt and pulled it back and forth away from her skin, fanning the droplets of perspiration which covered her back and chest. She searched the room for a remote to the television while waiting for Carol to arrive back with her mother.

Margaret sat for quite a while, allowing her mind to wander over the events of the past week. It seemed strange to sit alone in the house, knowing that she shared it with Amy's father. He was a twisted man, probably having some wild fantasy about her in the other room. It gave her an eerie feeling. Her emotions toiled with her ability to rationalize, and somewhere in it all she developed a strange thirst for revenge. The recent talk with Heather stuck out in her mind. How interesting, Heather's advice actually appealed to her. The images from last night's dreams still bounced back and forth in her mind, and Todd, just down the hall. She wondered if she approached him, whether he would make an advance on her.

Jeremy had hurt her, probably more than she realized. His lies and deceit proved a sharp knife, cutting deeply into the tattered remains of what she called trust. She knew their relationship was more like an act of convenience than a bond of love or romantic relationship. There was never a future for them, but the relationship still needed some trust to function.

Her thoughts drifted back further to the night of her graduation. She kept seeing Jeremy with the other girl, remembering the pain she felt knowing he had cheated on her. Then, in the same image, she saw Todd with the various women she had witnessed him with. It was then that she realized just how alike they were.

Perhaps Heather was right, Margaret thought to herself. Maybe she and Heather had more in common than she realized, just like Todd and Jeremy. The only distinction was that Margaret knew the truth about every one of them. The thought of revenge tempted her deeply. She wanted to take someone like Jeremy, and make him feel small and insignificant. She wanted to take away this person's self respect, and turn the tables in the manipulative art.

Margaret closed her eyes, realizing the horrible nature of the thoughts crossing her mind. It sickened her to think her mind could even contemplate such an idea, but then, everything she had found the past week had sickened her, and she had grown more accustomed to the feeling.

One thing kept coming back to Margaret. The way Heather talked about her husband, and how she could never believe her husband had cheated on her. She seemed so blind to what went on around her. Todd played the game better than Heather, and he would keep getting away with it. He truly was a professional. She had pictures of him, but it wasn't enough. She worried that he might get some personal satisfaction from seeing the pictures, and he probably had some of his own. The impact she left on his life had to prove more devastating than that. She had to do more.

Margaret wanted revenge, and nothing could stop her. She had carried her feelings of betrayal around for far too long. She wanted to make somebody beg, she wanted to return some of the pain and anxiety. She wanted to see Todd as a powerless pawn, like the women he seduced and betrayed so often.

Suddenly she knew what she had to do. She would confront him with the truth. Over the past few days, her feelings and instincts were clouded by a deep haze which kept her from seeing

clearly, but she now felt sure of her purpose. Deciding that she couldn't resist the temptation, feeling that her instincts served her well, she peeked out the window to see if Heather had driven up yet.

Her thoughts collided wildly in her head as she walked down the hallway to Todd's home office. The walls seemed to urge her on, growing brighter as she neared the entrance to the study. She reached the door just as she finished formulating her plan of attack. Then something else occurred to her. It wasn't enough. She remembered her own feelings from a controlling partner, and the belittlement it caused her.

Heather had gone to great lengths to create the fantasy of her life. She would need to go farther to leave an impact. She would push beyond the confrontation. She undid the top button to the shirt she wore as she knocked lightly on the slightly opened door.

"Yes," called the voice from inside.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mayor Whitmore," Margaret lied as she walked into the room. She noticed his eyes giving her the once over as she stood at the doorway. "I was just sitting out there thinking to myself, and I wondered if I might ask you a few questions. I've always wondered what a life in politics would be like, and I know that you're really busy, but I thought you might shed some light on things for me?" she asked, trying to seem sincere.

"Sure," answered Todd as he set aside the report in his hands. He enjoyed looking her over, she thought to herself. The knee-length gray skirt displayed her firm legs, and her short sleeved red shirt revealed a low neckline with the two buttons undone. Sick thoughts now collided in the corners of his one track mind, she was sure of that.

"How old are you, Margaret?" he asked innocently.

"I'm eighteen," she answered, feeling satisfied with his reaction to her inquiry. She had hoped he would entertain her questions in this manner. He took pride in his job, and enjoyed talking himself up to others. "I'll be going to college this fall and I've always had a desire to work in politics, but there are a few rumors I've heard. I hoped you might confirm if there was any truth to them."

Margaret walked into the room and sat down in one of the two leather chairs across from Todd's desk. She leaned back and crossed her legs to retain some modesty. Degrading herself was not her intention.

"You definitely hear a lot of stories making it sound glamorous," agreed Todd, "but it's really hard work. You're always trying to satisfy your constituents. People expect you to have the perfect answer for any problem which arises. There's a lot of pressure involved with a career in politics."

"But there are rewards also, aren't there?" Margaret questioned, not interested in his story about the labor of the job, and eager to answer her other questions.

“Oh sure, it has its rewards. Sometimes it’s a piece of legislation you’re trying to get past the city council, or you’re trying to bring in a new company to provide more jobs for the community.”

Margaret watched him closely as he talked to her. The man’s eyes seemed to wander from her face down to the skirt she wore. She could tell that his thoughts did not center on his political agenda. He was a master of speech, capable of talking shop while he slowly studied his companion in conversation. It was a developed trait, an ability to read the mind of those you spoke to by their facial expressions, and a trait necessary for a successful career in politics. A sense of excitement came over her as she decided to force the conversation farther.

“I’m not talking about those kinds of rewards,” Margaret interrupted. With the new topic she wished to introduce, manners really didn’t matter anymore. She exchanged the interested smile on her face for a more intuitive smirk. “I’m talking about the power that you get from it. It must be great to know that you’re the most powerful man in the whole city.”

“I don’t look at it that way,” Todd defended, not quite sure where the sudden remark had stemmed from. “I’m trying to do some good for the people who elected me. I’m not really in it for the power.”

“Of course you are,” exclaimed Margaret as she glanced her eye at him in a fashion that made it hard to distinguish whether it was a wink or just a nervous twitch. “There are a lot of people out there who would love the job you have. Power is very appealing to people. Some people kill for power, it’s an addictive drug. Just being associated with you might be satisfying to some people. I bet there’s a lot of women who would love to get their hands on you?”

“I’m afraid I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” spoke Todd as he hesitated slightly. Margaret could sense that he was extremely uncomfortable. She relished watching the bewildered look that surfaced across the confines of his face. He didn’t seem quite as big and intimidating to her anymore. Margaret liked her new role as the aggressor. The pleasure she received from seeing him so nervous pushed her to pursue the conversation.

“Sure you do, Mr. Mayor,” persisted Margaret in a serious and unrelenting tone. “In fact, I’m sure there are women out there who literally throw themselves at you – probably some very beautiful women too – the kinds of women a man like yourself might find extremely hard to resist.”

“I think maybe this conversation has been carried to far...” uttered Todd with a nervous stutter to his voice. She noticed a hint of anger as well, though she paid it little attention.

“I came back up to your office after your daughter and I visited you a couple of days ago,” stated Margaret as she interrupted him again. “I thought I had left something behind. Your secretary wasn’t at her desk, so I went ahead and cracked the door to your office to ask if I might look for it. Imagine my surprise when I saw the spectacle inside. You appeared to be doing a

pretty good job of satisfying at least one of your voting constituents. Tell me, Mr. Mayor, do you try that hard to please all your voters?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he lied in utter shock. He tried desperately to maintain his senses, but felt the heat in his cheeks as the blood rushed to his embarrassed face. He wished he could cover his face as he searched through his memory to recall the afternoon interlude with his secretary.

"Oh, I'm sure I could refresh your memory," explained Margaret calmly. "You see, I was wearing my cassette tape player, and I was so impressed by the shrills from secretary, that I just had to capture part of it on tape. Now, you might think that your wife wouldn't believe my story, but I've listened to the tape since then, and I can clearly make out your voice on the tape, as well as Mrs. Abrams screaming your name excitably. It's quite undeniable. I could bring it over for the whole family to enjoy later this evening if you would like."

"What do you want from me?" Todd asked in horror.

Margaret saw the bead of sweat rolling down the side of his head and knew she had frightened the man. She was eager to finish what she had come here for, but at the same instant, she wanted to absorb this moment. Heather was right, revenge did feel good. Little did Heather know that she had advised Margaret to seek it on her own husband.

"Satisfaction," she replied simply, "like all the voters demand. Like your secretary demanded."

"What would you do?" he asked, trying to collect himself.

"Well I don't really see any need to start any rumors about what I saw in your office, but there is something you could do for me to assure me that I need to keep my lips sealed. I do have one simple request," she uttered calmly.

"What's that?" he asked with a tremble in his voice.

"Reveal yourself to me," she replied, quoting the film that Jeremy had subjected her to. She still recalled the scene as plainly as though she had just seen it. More importantly, she recalled the anger it had caused her.

"What?"

"I want to get a good look at you," she continued, using the same mannerism as the film.

"You want me to undress?"

"Oh, come on now, you didn't have any problems revealing yourself to the other women. What makes this any different?" she pointed out as rationally as she could under the circumstances.

"You want me to seduce you?" he asked in disbelief.

The thought made Margaret cringe. The horror of catching herself with him in her dreams made her queasy, but it didn't hold a stone to actually committing such an act. It was a logical

question from his point of view, she told herself. After all, he thought that was what every woman wanted or required. Margaret wouldn't lower herself to that level, but she knew for the sake of her goal, she couldn't let him know that.

"Not yet," Margaret answered, reciting a line Jeremy had once spoken to her. "First I need to examine the merchandise, before I can decide if it's worth the price."

"What?"

"It's a simple request. You had no problems asking the same of your own lovers."

"Right here," Todd asked in confusion.

"You catch on quickly," Margaret replied coolly. It was easy, she thought, the words etched in her mind like unhealing scars.

"You're kidding."

"Don't disappoint me," she warned him with impatience as she motioned with her hand for him to stand up. It was a new role for her. For a moment, she understood why Jeremy enjoyed this so much. She received a great sense of power from exercising this much control over another individual.

Todd stood up and unbuckled his belt, glancing up at her in bewilderment. Margaret stopped him before he could remove any clothes. She wanted more, like his pride. He still maintained some respect in this manner. She wanted his dignity.

"Slower, Mr. Mayor," she stressed firmly, remembering vividly the way that Jeremy had said the same things. "You have to tease the girl a little bit. You've been to the clubs. You know how it's done. Come on, entertain me a little bit. If a girl undressed that way in a club, she wouldn't have a job at the end of the night."

Todd had removed his shoes before standing up, and he slowly slid off his trousers, bearing the silk briefs he wore beneath. Margaret really didn't want to see him naked, and had to hide a giggle, but she wouldn't turn back now. She had played the act perfectly, and her character wanted him bare. I should have taken drama, she thought to herself as she urged him on. I would have been good at it.

Todd slowly unbuttoned his shirt. He threw it over to her as she motioned for it with her hands. Her facial expressions changed as he took each garment off, and he wondered what would happen next. Margaret enjoyed the spectacle with an unrighteous satisfaction. She noticed her pulse quickening as he came closer to the natural look, but her excitement didn't come from any fleshly desire. She obtained a thrill from watching this man stripped of the one thing she detested the most about him, his power. He looked so simple before her, and so defenseless.

He looked back at her in wonder, trying to figure out if this was what she wanted. He felt unsure of himself, and didn't like the shame he carried on his bare shoulders. He expected her to

stand at any moment, and match his nakedness with her own, but she just sat there, waiting. He hoped his visual performance would soon end.

“Hello, Todd,” came the familiar voice from the kitchen. “We’re home.”

Margaret looked up at the petrified face of the man who stood in nothing but his briefs. He had thrown each article across the desk to where she sat, the bundle of clothes in her lap. Todd started to walk around the desk to retain his clothes when she held a halting hand towards him.

“If you stop now, I swear I’ll scream,” she whispered up at him.

“You wouldn’t,” he challenged her intent, prodding for some indication of her withdrawal from the dangerous situation they now stood in. He hoped that she would retreat, knowing it could hurt her as much as him, but she didn’t seem to care.

“I could throw myself into a very awkward and convincing position with no trouble at all,” she threatened him in a serious whisper. “What do you think your wife would think when she ran in and found you naked next to a screaming girl. That would look good in the newspaper. Mayor seduces young minor in the privacy of his own home.” She paused a moment for the shock to sink in. “I have nothing to lose, do you?”

“What more do you want? We can’t do it here.”

“Let’s have a look,” she commanded, not paying attention to the remark.

Todd stared momentarily in horror as he looked through the sheer curtain covering the window behind him. Margaret could see the van parked in the driveway, but knew that nobody could see in from outside. She smiled as she watched him squirm from fear.

“Are you home, honey?” called out the voice from the kitchen.

“You’d better answer her,” whispered Margaret, delighting in his fright. “You don’t want her to come looking for you.”

“Yes, dear,” Todd yelled out, his voice still jittery. “How was shopping?”

“Just fine, dear. I got some steaks for dinner...”

“Come on, Mr. Mayor,” insisted Margaret as she spoke softly and firmly to him. “I’m not a satisfied voter... Finish the job you started, we don’t want to be in here forever. She might walk in here to see your cute little face.”

Margaret loved the intense rush she felt as she worked the man like putty in her fingers. The exhilaration she received from controlling his actions completely masked the fear that Heather might come looking for him. This is what she wanted. This is what she had come here for, to give him a good look at himself. Heather claimed to carry the other end of her husband’s leash, but at the moment, the leash had changed hands.

Todd closed his eyes and slowly reached down, removing the briefs from his naked body. Margaret stared at him for several seconds with a serious, but unchanged look on her face, and

then she cracked a smile. The smile was nothing like Todd expected. It was not a smile of gratification, more of a smirk.

“That’s it,” Margaret uttered as she started to giggle. “I tell you, our politicians just keep coming up shorter and shorter on the real issues.”

Margaret stood up and tossed the clothes one at a time back to him. She turned and walked away, still trying to contain her laughter, and still carrying his pants in her hands. She could here him fumbling around with his clothes as he tried to get dressed before someone else came in the room.

“I think your secretary was faking it,” Margaret called back to him in a lowered voice so the occupants in the kitchen couldn’t hear her. “You just don’t have the potential to be more than a city politician.”

“What will you do now?” he asked in a frantic voice as he extended a hand, waiting for her to throw him his pants.

“Don’t worry,” Margaret smiled at the man. “I won’t tell anyone about you and your secretary. We all have our little secrets, even if some of our little secrets are smaller than most? Do whatever you want with her, she won’t be around for long. She’s obviously in it for the power. Once you lose your office, you won’t be anything at all to women.”

“You’ll destroy the tape you have then?” whispered Todd across the room, ignoring the insult. He still held out his hand, motioning for her to toss back his pants.

“Sure, Mr. Mayor, I’ll destroy it.”

She threw her hand forward, as if to toss the pants back to him, but faked him out as she never released her grip. An obnoxious smile crossed her face as she stepped out the door with the pants still in her hand. Todd knew that he could do nothing.

Margaret did the top button of her blouse back up as she stepped out the door and walked calmly towards the kitchen. She could hear Todd tripping over his shoes behind her as she pulled the door closed. She tossed the pants on the floor in his bedroom as she headed up towards the kitchen. That ought to make him wonder, she thought to herself.

“What a moron. I can’t believe he bought the story about the tape,” she whispered to nobody as she continued down the hall towards the kitchen.

“Well hello, Margaret, I didn’t realize you were here?” exclaimed Heather as Margaret walked into the kitchen.

“I was just in chatting with your husband,” explained Margaret, trying to hide her smile.

“What about,” inquired Heather.

“Politics mostly.”

“I find all that a little boring,” Heather admitted in a whisper.

“Yeah,” agreed Margaret. “Don’t tell your husband, but I didn’t get that excited either.”

Heather smiled at the remark, the way a young schoolgirl would. Heather did this often, trying to fit in with everyone around her. Margaret didn't buy it anymore. She knew there were two faces to this woman before her. She put her feelings aside, once again taking up the role of the well-mannered neighbor kid. Down the hallway, someone had seen a new face on her as well.

Margaret helped Heather and Carol put the groceries away. She couldn't see the hallway from inside the kitchen, but knew that Todd had gained enough courage to step out of his study by now. He would run to his bedroom and find them there, then relief would set in. The relief would only last a moment, and then the original shock would return. It took only a few minutes before she heard the front door closing as the nervous mayor left the house for some air. He could hardly talk straight as he uttered a quick explanation for how he needed to run to the office to pick up some papers. The man never even exchanged glances with Margaret. She had left her impression.

Once the mayor left the house, Margaret returned from her dubious state to her usual self. She felt good, as though she had accomplished something grand, and wanted to do something fun tonight. Margaret talked Carol into seeing a show that evening, and they decided to hit a burger bar for some fast food before the movie. The two said good-bye to Heather as they left her alone with her sons in the large house.

Margaret sat down with her journal as soon as she got home that evening. Her aunt and uncle were already in bed after coming home from the horse show. They had left a plate of food out in the refrigerator for her to eat, but right now she just wanted to get her thoughts down on paper.

"...Today I did something which I'm not proud of. I forced Todd to disrobe before me at his home while Heather was there, just to get back at Jeremy and every other guy like him. I also wanted to prove to myself that he wasn't all that Heather talked him up to be. He really wasn't.

I'm sure I really upset him when it was over. He's really insecure and I wanted to get back at him as much as at Heather for what they did. I intend to ruin them both before I am finished here. It all sounds so terrible when I write it on paper, but I'm glad I did it. I have only begun here.

I guess I did it to get even with Heather. I feel terrible, but at the same moment, vindicated. I shouldn't have used Todd that way, but then I know he's used many people throughout his lifetime. I guess my emotions blinded me slightly, but it felt good to see somebody squirm like that. It's demeaning to say this, but I got some sort of thrill out of doing it, and I wish I could turn back the clock and do the same thing to Jeremy the first time I saw him naked.

Tomorrow I will travel out of town to try to find Greg Thompson. I want to try to get him together with Heather. Then all I need is to have Todd catch them and start asking questions. That should make things uneasy on both ends. I still don't know what I will do from there. I don't want to hurt Carol or her brothers in any way, but I have to give Heather a taste of her own medicine..."

Margaret woke up after nine the next morning. Her aunt had made breakfast early, but sat down to fix Margaret a meal when she appeared from her room. Margaret enjoyed the chat with her aunt, and then escaped to the bathroom for a shower. Her eagerness caused her to move much faster than the day before. She took a road map with her, feeling sure of her next move. Her aunt didn't even ask her where she planned to go as Margaret left the house for her car, not all that odd, her aunt knew that she could take care of herself. Margaret wondered how much more her aunt knew about her.

It was almost noon when she arrived in the small town after a short drive. The founders had set the roads on a grid, and she found the building quite easily. Not a very large town, she thought to herself, the size where everyone knows who you are, and secrets are hard to keep. It wasn't much larger than Deer Hollow, but in Deer Hollow, some families still had their secrets.

She parked far away from the building, not wanting her car in plain view. Margaret climbed out of her car and walked into the auto shop. The business sold tires, and she decided to use that as her front to get some information. The shop didn't seem very busy at this time of the afternoon, so she hoped the attendant wouldn't walk out to take a look at the four brand new tires on her vehicle.

A young man sat behind the counter, talking with another customer on the phone. He was a thin, wiry looking young kid, only a year out of high school, if that. He had pulled his long dark hair back into a pony tail and his blue, button down shirt hung loosely over the black T-shirt he wore beneath. He nodded at her politely, only because he had to, and returned to the person on the phone who had clearly irritated him from the look on his face. Margaret used the wait as a chance to look around the store before talking with the salesperson.

The shop was a fairly large operation, but the building looked old. There were three garages, two occupied by other automobiles which had come in for repairs. Several other employees were out in the garage working on the two cars. Margaret didn't see anyone who looked as old as she imagined Greg Thompson. No one really looked older than twenty-one.

As Margaret walked around the waiting room, she noticed an office next to the front desk which looked like it belonged to the management. She could tell that she still had a minute before the salesman would get to her. He buried his face in a book, and held his hand to his forehead, trying to rub out the intense headache the call had caused. He paid no attention to

Margaret, and her curiosity overcame her. She walked over and looked through the window at the unoccupied office, hoping to find some sign that this was the place.

The last person inside had left the light on, and Margaret could see a family picture sitting on the desk inside. The owner had a beautiful young family, a boy and a girl. His wife looked like a model, her dark brown hair perfectly done for the proud picture of her family. Old newspaper clippings decorated the wall of the office, and Margaret recognized one of the articles immediately, even from the long distance separating her and the wall.

It was the same article that she had discovered Greg Thompson's identity from, the article of that homecoming night, when her conception had occurred. The sight of the clipping sent a chill down Margaret's spine. She knew immediately that this was the man whom Heather had spent that evening with. This was Margaret's real father.

"Can I help you, Miss?" asked a voice behind her.

Margaret turned around suddenly to face the man who had just finished talking on the phone. She knew she had jumped quite badly as he startled her with his intrusion. She felt embarrassed to get caught snooping around and her face turned bright red.

"Are you Mr. Thompson?" Margaret asked, trying to act air-headed.

"No," answered the gentleman, "but if he was here, you were looking in the right place. That's his office there, and he's usually in there working on the books. Did you need to speak with him?"

"Oh, no," answered Margaret. "I just wondered what Mr. Thompson looks like. I heard he was an old football star."

"Yeah, that's usually all you get to hear about around here. He's sure proud of his glory days. He'll be out for another hour, he's to lunch. As a matter of fact, he only left about ten minutes ago, you just missed him. You could come back then if you want to see him."

"No," answered Margaret with a grin. "My dad just played ball with him when they were both younger. He sent me here because he said Mr. Thompson was an honest man. I usually like to talk to the managers of the stores when I come in to ask questions, that way I know I'm not getting ripped off. Women get taken at auto shops."

"Mr. Thompson's a pretty fair man. I can give you some prices now if you'd like, and you can shop around for a bit. He'll beat any other price you find in town. There's only two other shops here, so you can check around if you would like and come back when he's here to deal with him directly."

"That sounds great," Margaret answered. "I got the price for the tires I need off your display, so I'll check around and drop back by in about an hour."

"Sounds good," answered the man as he went back to the shop to finish the car that he worked on.

Margaret left the shop and walked out to her car. She couldn't have asked for things to go smoother. She drove about a block down the road, and then stepped out of her car and walked back to a phone booth where she could see into the shop. She looked around her first, making sure that the man who had just helped her didn't notice her standing there. She stood at a booth across the street and half way down the block from the shop. Margaret dialed the number and watched to see who would answer the call.

One of the other employees working in the garage took his turn to answer the customer call, and Margaret knew he wouldn't recognize her voice. She could tell by his walk that he didn't like answering phone calls, but in all honesty, she really didn't care. She watched him pick up the phone and heard the voice through her end of the line.

"Good Afternoon, Thompson's Auto."

"Is Mr. Thompson in, please?" Margaret asked over the phone.

"No, he's out to lunch right now. Can I help you?"

"Would you mind taking a message for me?" Margaret continued.

"Sure ma'am, let me grab a piece of note paper."

"Could you ask him to call Mrs. Heather Whitmore."

"Do you have a number?"

"Sure," answered Margaret, as she read the Whitmore's number from her own notebook, "and could you ask him to call me right around four o'clock. It's really important."

"All right ma'am, I'll make a note of that and make sure he gets it as soon as he returns from lunch."

"Thank you," answered Margaret as she hung up the phone. She watched the person walk over and place the small note on the door to Greg Thompson's office, and felt satisfied with the call. Upon returning the short distance to her car, she looked at her watch and realized she had only about an hour to reach Heather's house. She started the engine of the reliable little car and started back towards Harrison.

Margaret reached the Whitmore home a little after three thirty. Todd's car wasn't there, but the other vehicle sat in the driveway. She felt relieved that traffic had remained sparse on the drive, and that no officers patrolled the road as she sped back to Harrison. She climbed out of the car quickly, anxious to see Heather's face when the call came. Margaret walked up to the door, hoping that Carol was home.

"Hi, Margaret," uttered Carol as she opened the door. "I've been trying to reach you since lunch, your aunt didn't know where you were."

"I was out looking around some other parts of the valley. I was on my way back into town and thought I would drop by for a visit. Are you busy?"

“No,” answered Carol. An afternoon spent alone with her mother meant she would enjoy a visit from almost anyone, but she felt particularly relieved to see Margaret. “Come right in. My mom and I were sitting around watching some talk shows, but we can go do something if you would like.”

“Actually, it’s really hot outside. I wouldn’t mind sitting around in the air conditioning for a while until I can cool off.”

Margaret knew that Carol had wanted to escape, but her friend had no idea what the future would bring. After the call, Margaret promised herself, then she would rescue Carol from an exciting afternoon with her mother. Margaret didn’t outright lie to her friend, the ride had caused perspiration to appear across her skin, and the cool air felt good against it.

Margaret followed Carol into the family room where Heather sat on the couch. She seemed deeply involved in the show and didn’t even notice Margaret as she walked in. She didn’t look like her usual self today, dressed in cheaper and more comfortable shorts and a loose shirt. She pulled her hair out of her eyes, not wanting to bother with it while she watched the television.

The overall mood of the house seemed more relaxed today. Carol’s brothers roamed the neighborhood outside, and all three in the house had dressed down for the unbearable heat. Margaret wished she could exchange her denim shorts for something more comfortable like Carol wore. Things about the house seemed different today, nobody to entertain. Heather escaped the world for some enchanted daydream in the back of her mind, but she hadn’t changed any. Things only seemed different.

The three sat around enjoying the show for some time. Margaret watched the clock carefully, waiting for the phone call. Carol had retrieved two cold sodas from the refrigerator to quench their thirsts as they watched the big screen. The cool refresher created a burning sensation in her mouth as the tiny bubbles danced down her dry throat on the path to her stomach. It hit the spot after an hour drive in the hot afternoon sun.

The phone rang promptly at four. Heather picked it up and uttered a hello into the receiver. Margaret watched as a look of terror came over her face and she snapped out of the trance created by an afternoon of television. The look lasted only a moment.

“Well, hello Mrs. Brubaker,” Heather uttered into the receiver as she regained her composure. “I didn’t expect to hear from you today No, I don’t recall Yeah, it has been a while Well sure, that sounds lovely Tomorrow at nine for a late breakfast Yes Mrs. Brubaker, I’ll be there Count on it.”

Heather sat down the phone and looked back at the two girls. She smiled over at Margaret for a moment, but then turned around to watch the television again. The woman could

handle herself under pressure, much better than her husband. Heather returned to the semi-conscious state as the television once again soaked her up in its tempting trance.

Margaret's hopes fell as she continued to wait. She finally gave up hope at a quarter to five, and suggested to Carol that they go out and get some fresh air. The girls didn't even wake Heather from her nap as they walked out the door. Margaret found it odd that she had such a smile on her face while she slept.

Margaret got home early in the evening and went out for a ride with her uncle. The peaceful open range took her mind off the tension she felt, and allowed her some time to unwind. They brought Carol along with them and took it easy, as she had only ridden one time before this.

The three returned just before sunset, putting the gear away and feeding the horses with the last moments of light fading away. Carol joined Margaret and her relatives for dinner, and the three had a long, enjoyable conversation.

Margaret had informed Carol before meeting her relatives that her aunt and uncle thought they knew each other from school. She explained that they would have thought she was crazy for talking to somebody she hardly knew and becoming such good friends so soon. Carol understood and went along with the lie, so it wouldn't worry the older couple.

Carol left soon after dinner, and Margaret returned to her room for the evening. She broke out the journal and quickly wrote down the events of the day. She had hoped that her real father would call Heather, but now knew that she would have to try something else.

“... Today I got up and took a ride out to the business of Greg Thompson. After finding him, I'm sure he is the man who fathered me. He owns a small auto shop about an hour away from here.

He's the same man who scored a touchdown against Harrison, winning their homecoming game, and his jersey had the number 87 on it. It fits together perfectly. I didn't get the chance to see him face to face, but did view a picture of him with his family. I have a feeling I will bump into him eventually.

I left the message for him as I indicated I would do yesterday, but he never responded. Still, something bothers me, and I don't know what it is...”

Chapter Twelve

Margaret awoke from a long night's sleep feeling refreshed, but at the same time unsettled. Her dreams had again consumed her while she rested, and they ran together, making little sense.

She dreamt of her father, though she had given him little thought over the past few weeks. At first, she had held him accountable for her mother's actions as well, but upon meeting Heather, her feelings had shifted. Heather was a strong willed woman, and Margaret felt that she could stand up for herself.

She felt judgmental for blaming Heather directly, realizing she knew little about the circumstances surrounding the abortion. In her own opinion, she had always hated when people blamed the mother for the abortion. It took two to create a child, and both had a responsibility. It had always seemed so hypocritical to find fault with the mother, since it was her choice. Margaret had never felt it fair for the male to retain the right to give a woman that choice, and her views were always moderate because of this, but that was before it was her life that the argument was about.

Other things bothered Margaret this morning as well. There was something that didn't sit well with her, though she couldn't place a finger on it. As she got out of bed and started her morning routine, she couldn't get beyond the overwhelming feeling that she had forgotten something.

An hour later, her senses still rattled, she left the house to see Carol. She needed to get out. With her aunt at a friend's house, and her uncle away, she was losing her mind all alone. She took off in a rush for town, deciding she would pick up Carol and go take some pictures of the countryside.

Margaret pulled off the long and winding road and sped up as she merged to the highway. While she accelerated, she tried to clear her thoughts, but it didn't work. As she drove down the road, her mind in another world, she suddenly recognized the mini van that passed her going the other direction. She jerked her head instinctively, and confirmed her surprise as she watched Heather driving out of town. Margaret continued for a few more seconds before she remembered that Heather had a breakfast date with some woman she had talked with the previous day. That's when the whole situation struck her as rather odd.

The roads were quite barren as she slowed and turned her car around in the opposite direction. It took a few minutes driving down the windy road through the hilly terrain before she caught a glimpse of the van ahead of her. She was careful to keep her distance as she followed, her interest in Heather's trip growing intensely as she studied the area.

There was one other car between her and Heather's van. She could see Heather alone this morning, and knew that something strange was up. She turned the radio down a bit, trying to concentrate on not making it obvious that she had followed the van. Heather didn't appear to notice.

About twenty miles down the highway, the van pulled off onto a dirt road. Margaret decided to stay on the highway, driving about a half mile down the road before pulling over and doubling back. She hoped that she hadn't lost Heather by continuing on, but didn't want to seem obvious.

Margaret drove up the dirt road, past an old deserted cemetery. A sign on the side of the road indicated that there was a large campsite at the end, and the condition of the road told her it was infrequently traveled.

Margaret followed the dirt road up a small canyon for about three miles before reaching the campsite. The trees grew denser as she neared the camp. The campsite had several small roads breaking off the main road that Heather had driven in on, and each led up through the trees, making it hard to see if anyone was present at the different sites.

Each of the roads connected to one another through a large, main loop, so Margaret continued to an empty site, and found a spot to pull off into the trees where she wouldn't appear obvious. She shut off the car and walked back to the main entrance of the campsite, where a map of the entire camp was posted on a bulletin board.

Each of the campsites broke outside the large central loop which rejoined the main road. Heather hadn't come out yet, and since the road leading in was also the road leading out, this was the only place she could be. Margaret felt sure of this.

Margaret returned to the car and picked up a duffel bag which she had sitting on the seat. She stepped out of the car and started up into the trees where she could use the cover to hide in. Margaret paralleled the road leading through the site as she hiked through the trees. The place seemed desolate, even for the middle of the week. She had covered over half of the camp without seeing a single person when she came across the small tent far away from the road.

Margaret pulled out her camera and extended zoom lens from her duffel bag, kneeling down so that she could see beneath the canopy of pines in the forest. She looked over towards the road, trying to identify the car of the tent's owner. The old Camaro didn't look at all familiar to Margaret, and so she passed it by as a lone camper.

Margaret continued on her journey for several hundred more yards before coming to the next site. Here she found something which puzzled her. The van which Heather drove sat parked in the stall of the site, but Heather was nowhere around it.

Margaret surveyed the area cautiously with the lenses. If Heather was anywhere in the camp, it was far away from the van. Margaret followed the road down to the next campsite, but found it unoccupied as well. Then something occurred to her and she hurried back to the van.

Margaret reached the van and slowly snuck up to where she could see inside. She looked around again before she approached it, remaining extremely cautious, and peeked inside the van through the windows.

Inside, Margaret found something even more peculiar. A blouse and skirt lay on the back seat of the van, next to a small sack which sat opened. Heather had emptied the sack of its contents, and locked the doors of the van.

Margaret quickly left the van and returned in the direction of the tent she had passed by earlier. As she neared the shelter, she moved extremely slowly and quietly. She was about thirty yards from the structure when she heard voices from inside the tent.

Margaret found a safe, secluded spot behind a tree and sat down to catch her breath and listen to the voices. The sounds were playful giggling and she immediately recognized Heather's voice as one of the two inside. She listened for some time to the conversation inside before the talk ended and she heard a rustling from inside. Then she knew she realized that she had been fooled.

Margaret circled the tent from about forty yards, using the trees for cover. She reached a point where she could finally see inside the tent through the screen door, and pulled the camera back out of her bag so she could get a better look.

The scene inside the tent seemed uninhibited. It became apparent immediately that this occurred more than once before. The couple moved together with some familiarity. She watched the naked bodies rolling around on the blankets inside the dome tent for a moment. The sight seemed odd, as it would for anyone the first time they caught their parents having sex. Still, these were the parents, who until a month ago, Margaret had never known, which made it seem even stranger.

They had cleared the tent of all other articles. Only the heavy blankets lying on the floor inside cushioned the hard ground. Margaret surveyed the area outside the tent and noticed numerous clothes scattered around just outside the structure. Wild thoughts of sinister doings filled Margaret's head and the opportunity grew too much for her.

Margaret could see that the door of the tent provided the only view out of it. She left the bag beneath the tree where she sat, and quickly circled around the tent to the back.

Margaret approached the structure quietly and slowly. The moans inside the tent had increased to a point where they were almost screams. Margaret walked around the structure, first from one side, carefully staying out of the view of the door. She picked up all the articles of

clothing that she could, and then walked back around the tent, to the other side, where she picked up the rest of the garments.

Margaret could tell from the sounds of the commotion inside that things had heated up. She quickly ran from the tent, back to the protection of the trees, using the loud moans to cover the sound of her feet on the forest floor.

She reached her duffel bag with the clothes in hand and threw them behind the cover of the tree. Margaret then reached into the bag, and pulled out the camera again, this time checking the film and settings.

Margaret pulled off the lens cap, and sprawled out across the forest floor, so she could keep steady. She felt amazed at how little of the zoom she had to use to get a good picture at this distance. She flipped on the date and time light on the camera, making sure the exact time would get recorded on each shot, and began taking pictures of the scene inside.

Margaret had about thirty-six exposures on the roll of film, and used up twelve of them getting perfectly revealing shots in under a few minutes. Even from this distance, she could hear the screams from the structure as the pair neared an end, and she decided she needed to start heading back to her car.

Margaret went through the clothes she had snatched off the ground, and pulled out the wallets and keys. She then buried the clothes in a ball behind the tree where she sat, and covered them with vegetation from the forest floor.

With the camera still in hand, Margaret ran back towards the old Camaro on the road, she ran farther away until she felt she had reached a safe distance. She found a large pine with a low canopy to hide her silhouette and sat back down with the camera. There she used the power of the zoom to get another clear shot of the tent.

Margaret waited patiently for the occupants of the tent to realize their clothes were missing, and in a few minutes, the two emerged from the structure. Margaret immediately began taking shots of the two naked people walking around the tent in a state of confusion. She knew she had to keep quiet, but had a hard time holding back her laughter as she watched.

Satisfied with the revealing nature and unmistakable clarity of the shots, she decided to get away before the couple realized that someone had stolen the clothes. She threw the bag back over her shoulder, and jumped up from beneath the tree where she hid, running towards her car.

She knew that the couple could not see her as she ran down the dirt road, judging by the distance between the road and the tent. Still, her adrenalin was rushing, and she ran quickly to her car, hardly able to contain her excitement. Margaret set the contents of the couples' pockets down on the hood of Heather's van as she ran past it, and didn't break her stride until she reached her own vehicle.

Margaret set the camera down on the seat of her car and quickly started it up. She pulled out of the stall and left the campsite to the main road leading out. She breathed a sigh of relief as she passed the last entrance to the campsite and looked back in her mirror to make sure nobody had followed her.

She reached the highway about six minutes later and pulled out onto the paved road. By now, the couple had probably gained the courage to walk to the van and found the keys sitting there. They would have to sacrifice the change of clothes they had brought for their morning of romance, as Margaret was sure they would never find them. She knew this was no great loss, but it had set up some undeniable shots.

Margaret only hoped that she would see Heather some time later in the day. She wanted to see the panic on the woman's face, and the way she handled herself when she realized somebody knew about the affair, but Margaret had done one better. She had caught the look on their faces as they realized that she was caught, and that meant everything to Margaret. Everything was on film.

Margaret returned home early in the afternoon. Her aunt had gone into town for some groceries, leaving the house vacant. She knew the time was perfect to sit down and explain her feelings to her journal.

"...I can't believe how some people will go out of their way to complicate their lives. Nothing I've learned since I've been here has ceased to amaze me. The town's most famous couple just so happens to be the town's most promiscuous couple. All I did was allow myself to become another chapter in their book of lies.

Ever since I got here, I've tried to find a way to get even with Heather. I feel so ashamed at how low I have sunk to fulfill my desire. I tried to sink beneath her, and perform as vile of deeds as she has, just to make her see things for what they are, but now I find out that I didn't sink far enough.

I won't allow that to happen to me again. My ride back from the camp where I caught her with my real father, made me realize that I didn't achieve anything by embarrassing Todd in that way. I now realize that in trying to become worse than her, all I did was brought myself down to her level. It would take someone like Heather to destroy Heather. I don't want to be like Heather.

After finding Jeremy in the woods, I decided I would start acting on my impulses more often. I guess that's what I did with Todd. I wanted so badly to destroy him, that I didn't see what I had become in the process. I acted on a sick momentary desire for revenge, and I'll have to live with that reality for the rest of my life.

Something has to be done soon. The more time I spend around these people, the lower I find myself sinking. A month ago, I never would have dreamed of such a hideous act. Yet, I didn't think twice when it came to getting some revenge on Todd. I need to finish the business I set out to do and then separate myself from these people.

The two of them have cast a vision of complete falsehood about their actions. I can't believe that people around here buy into the whole charade. It's just too obvious to anyone who dares to look deeper into what's going on around here.

I feel almost grateful that my mother decided she didn't want me. I don't think I would like her very much as a parent, and I would have missed out on the wonderful family that did raise me. It sounds incomprehensible to think, but I believe I got the better end of the bargain the way things turned out.

Still, I can't let her actions go unanswered. I think about the two others whom she tossed away. I want to make Heather's life a living hell. Her entire existence seems based upon the satisfaction she receives from being looked upon so highly by all her peers. She thrives on her popularity, almost like a homecoming queen who never wants to step off the float in the parade. That's how I will destroy her.

I'll let everyone know the truth about her hidden life. I will end the existence that she now knows. I'll show the entire town the truth behind her charade. I'll give them all the proof they need to believe all the terrible things about her. Then, when things start calming down, and her whole life is in shambles, I'll show them all the rest of the pictures.

I want the world to see the pictures of the child she aborted, and the documentation to prove that it isn't some big hoax. Maybe my father doesn't want the world to know about the little experiment he was involved in almost eighteen years ago, but I think the world deserves to know. I'm ashamed of my real mother, and I want the world to know.

I have learned one thing in particular about Heather. She isn't afraid of anything. It appears that she thinks her actions are excusable because of her social status. I hate that attitude. I hate it in lawyers, in politicians, and in the local snob.

I want her to see her actions come back to haunt her. People need to learn to take more responsibility for their actions, like the fathers who refuse to pay child support for their own children, to women who use abortions as a means of birth control. I feel they are all wretched abuses of power. I feel like it's just another form of child abuse, hurting those incapable of standing up for themselves.

Maybe it's just my point of view, because I should be just another child who was tossed away after the abortion, but in the past few weeks, my feelings towards these people have grown into a rage. Holding these feelings inside me has changed who I am, and severely blinded my

judgment. I must stop sitting idly by, waiting for something to happen on its own. This afternoon on my way home I was rather unclear on what I would do next. Now I know..."

Margaret spent much of the next day riding the horses on the ranch. When she finally went into town, she found Carol sitting by her familiar tree in the park. From a distance, the girl looked wrapped up in what she read. Margaret could tell by the look on her face that something had upset her, and wanted to help the girl. She knew Carol just needed a friend right now, but didn't know what had happened.

Margaret walked over to where the girl sat, and slowly sat down on the grass in front of her. Carol didn't even look up from the several sheets of paper which she read.

The grass felt cool where the two girls sat in the shade. A slight breeze had blown most of the day and helped keep the blistering heat down to a minimum. The blades of grass poked into the bare skin of her legs. She slid her legs out beneath the shade of the trees to soak up some of the sun on her skin.

Carol wore shorts also. During the warm summers in Harrison, most of the people their age wore comfortable clothes and lazed around like these two girls. Margaret looked around and noticed that they were the only inhabitants of the park at this hot hour of the day.

"What's the matter, Carol?" Margaret asked, noticing the tears which the girl tried to hide.

"It's my mother."

"What about her?" Margaret asked, almost not wanting to hear anything more about Heather.

"She's making me go on this stupid campout to the mountains tomorrow."

"What's wrong with that?" Margaret asked sincerely. "I love the mountains. It's great to get out into the fresh air. There's hardly anyone around and you feel like you have the whole world to yourself. I don't understand why you wouldn't want to go."

"I love getting out in the mountains," answered Carol. "My mom and I go with several other mothers and their daughters all the time in the summer. She calls it the girls' weekend to go up in the mountain and act like men."

"So where's the problem?"

"This trip was completely unplanned," Carol uttered in disgust. "She called up the other mothers and set it up a few days ago. The only reason she did was because my boyfriend is going to be in town on those days. She doesn't want me to see him because she thinks we're too serious. So she's dragging me up into the hills where he can't get to me."

"Maybe she just decided this would be a good time to go?"

“She had to cancel her bridge group this week and we had already planned to go next weekend. She specifically moved it up to make sure I couldn’t see him.”

“You have a point there,” Margaret agreed. “So what are you going to do?”

“I’ll figure a way out of it,” Carol spoke with determination.

“I don’t want to butt in and try to tell you how to run your life,” began Margaret hesitantly. “I don’t know how close your boyfriend and you are exactly.”

“We’re close. My mom knows how close we are. That’s why she’s hauling me off into the mountains.”

“Well, if you and your boyfriend are so close, he’s probably willing to do just about anything you would ask him, right?”

“Sure he would,” Carol uttered confidently.

“Well then,” Margaret suggested. “It would seem like the most logical approach would be to have him meet you in the mountains.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you and the rest of the girls always camp at the same spot?”

“Sure, it’s our special spot.”

“Then you could explain to your boyfriend how to get up there, right?” Margaret asked.

“Sure,” answered Carol, beginning to smile as she realized what Margaret suggested.

“So you get up there, and your mom relaxes because she thinks she has you safely hidden from him. Then during the night, you sneak out from your tent, and meet your boyfriend a short walk away from the camp. Mom never suspects a thing, and you please everyone.”

“That sounds so romantic,” Carol uttered as she closed her eyes to allow her thoughts to wander. “It’s just like medieval times. I’ll be the princess trapped by the evil mother, and I’ll have to sneak off to be with my prince. We’d meet under the moonlight. It sounds so perfect, but it will never work.”

“What do you mean?” asked Margaret, confused.

“My mom’s a light sleeper. She hears everything. I could never leave the tent without her knowing. Even when we’re up there and I have to slip out to go to the bathroom, she wakes up, no matter how hard I try to keep quiet.”

Margaret sat for several seconds in deep thought. The sound of the mountains captivated her attention. She began to envy the young girl. Then a new idea struck her.

“What if you told your mom you were going off on a midnight hike with one of the other girls. She ought to let you go then.”

“Sure she would, but it wouldn’t happen. They’re all too young and naive. They couldn’t lie if their lives depended on it. They’re too virtuous and pure to take part in something that my mom didn’t approve of beforehand. None of them would ever go for it.”

“The girls around here are a lot different than where I come from. Where I come from, we’d do anything for a friend if she asked. Too bad you don’t have any of my friends going with you up there.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” interrupted Carol excitedly. “You like the mountains. Why don’t you come up there with us?”

“Oh, I couldn’t. Your mom didn’t invite me. I can’t just show up.”

“Are you kidding?” asked Carol. “My mom thinks you’re the greatest friend I ever had. She’d love to have you with us. I’ll ask her if I can invite you, she’ll jump on it.” “I don’t know, Carol,” spoke Margaret. “You’d better run it past your mother once first.”

“It’s a done deal,” answered Carol. “We’re leaving tomorrow afternoon. Can you clear things with your aunt and uncle by then?”

“Probably,” Margaret spoke hesitantly. She didn’t know how she felt about spending several days with Heather. She could hardly stand to be around her for more than a few minutes.

Margaret looked up at her friend and knew she had made the right decision. A new glow shown from the younger girl’s face that Margaret had never seen before.

Carol jumped up from the tree and began home to clear things with her mother. Margaret knew that she wouldn’t have any trouble convincing Heather that Margaret should go with them. Still, the idea of spending that much time with Heather didn’t appeal to her.

The park now seemed completely abandoned, and Margaret knew it was the ideal time to sit down and sort her feelings out in her journal. Before long, her attitude towards the weekend had changed.

“...Today I was asked to spend some time in the mountains with Heather and her daughter. I don’t know why I’m so excited about it, but I am. In the past few days, I have tried to think of ways to destroy Heather’s image in the town. My plans have been altered slightly now.

While up there this weekend, I will be around several of her closest friends. I know that this will be the opportunity to really bring out the truth. I’m not quite sure what I will do, but before the weekend is over, I will face Heather with the truth. With any luck, the whole camp will be around to witness it.

My only problem now is what to do about Carol. She’s an innocent bystander in this whole dilemma. I don’t want to involve her anymore than I have to, and the embarrassment could be harmful to her. If I can find a way to keep her out of it, I will, but I won’t allow her presence to halt what I have set out to do.

The only other obstacle I face now is getting these pictures developed. I looked through the phone book last night and found several small photography shops that also develop film. I need to find one with fairly liberal standards so that I can get this film developed...”

Margaret entered the amateur photography shop and walked up to the older man who sat at the counter. He smiled back at the pretty young girl and set the magazine he read off to the side. Margaret didn't bother looking at anything, but just walked straight over to the counter where he sat.

"What can I help you with?" the man asked politely.

"Well," began Margaret. "I received this new camera as a graduation present, but I live a few hours from here, and I won't be able to go home for a couple more weeks. I'm out here visiting with some relatives. I've already taken a couple of roles of film, but I haven't really seen how good of pictures it takes."

"I could develop the film for you this evening," explained the man. "Is it color?"

"Actually, it's all black and white. I've been experimenting with some different scenery, and I wanted to see how everything is turning out. Back home, I used to develop my own pictures at a local camera shop. The owner would rent out the room to me at an hourly rate plus supplies. I just wondered if I could talk you into the same deal."

"Do you have much experience?"

"I took a year of photography in school, and I develop most all of my own film. I won't be asking any questions of you. I know my way around a darkroom."

"Well, I suppose I could rent it out to you. I don't usually do this, but I always like to help out inspiring young photographers. How much did your friend back home charge you for each hour?"

"Ten dollars," Margaret replied.

"Well, I'll only charge you five since you have such a pretty face. My developer who works here comes in at three o'clock. It's only eleven now, so that should give you about four hours from start to finish. Will that be enough time for you?"

"That should be plenty."

The man led Margaret to the small room at the back of the store. He showed her where the supplies were and asked if there was anything else she needed. She told him no and thanked him for getting her started, then he left her alone to get to work.

Margaret left the shop at about two o'clock with her pictures and film in hand. She paid the man what she owed him and thanked him for his generosity. She showed the man some of the actual nature shots she had taken to finish the role, keeping the other pictures hidden in her bag. Then she quickly headed for her aunt and uncle's house.

She reached the house about twenty minutes later, and found her aunt busy cooking dessert in the kitchen. Her aunt yelled out a cheerful hello and Margaret joined her at the kitchen table.

“How’s everything going, Margaret?” her aunt asked intently.

“It’s been just great. I got up into the mountains to take some pictures yesterday, and this morning I took some historical pictures around town. This area is rich in history. I never knew about all the resources located around the valley.”

“Well good, Margaret. I’m glad you’re getting the chance to look around a bit. It’s different from your usual all day horse rides, but it’s nice to see a young person so interested in learning about history. You should take a trip out to the old mountain cemetery.”

“I was up at a camp above there earlier this week. I didn’t even think to stop by there and look around. I guess I got to wound up in the scenery up in the deep pines.”

“Where’s your friend Carol at today?”

“I just talked to her this morning,” Margaret replied. “She mentioned something yesterday afternoon about a camping trip that she and her mother are going on with a bunch of other women. She asked me today if I would like to go with them. I thought I would run the idea past you first.”

“Whatever for, Margaret?” her aunt asked sincerely.

“I just feel like I haven’t spent very much time with the two of you this week. I don’t want to feel like I’m just using the place for somewhere to sleep at nights.”

“Margaret,” her aunt replied softly. “You’ve been here for breakfast and dinner, and you’ve gone out riding practically every morning. Your uncle and I are old folks. You need to be out mingling with people your own age. We know you would be bored to tears if you just sat around here all day. As long as I know where you are, you’re free to do whatever you wish while you’re staying here. You know that.”

“Then you won’t mind?” Margaret asked with a serious tone.

“Not at all. You get out there and enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks, Aunt Kate.”

Margaret talked with her aunt for a little while before heading up to her room. Once there, she pulled out the photographs she had developed from her bag. The pictures had turned out great, and the faces of the people in each picture were clear and recognizable.

She had picked out the four most revealing shots from her collection of both Heather and Todd and developed triple prints of each. She decided to send out sets of each print to Todd’s office, Heather’s home and the local newspaper.

Margaret sat down with her journal and wrote down her plans for the pictures. She also pulled out a bag of envelopes she had purchased from a local store. She addressed each of the envelopes and placed a set of pictures inside each. She placed stamps on the envelopes and placed a false return address on them.

Margaret decided she would drop them in the mail tomorrow afternoon before she left on the camping trip. Each party would then receive the pictures sometime following the weekend. By then, things would have already reached a climax.

Margaret placed the envelopes inside her bag, and headed out to her car. She opened the trunk and began filling a duffel bag full of her climbing gear, which she always kept in the car with her. She figured she might find a use for it if she was going up into the mountains again.

After an hour, Margaret had all her gear together and decided she would spend the rest of the day out riding the horses. She prepared the horse for a ride and left the stables to find her uncle somewhere out on the ranch.

Margaret awoke early and put her things in her car. She took a short walk out to the stables to clear her mind. Anxiety had started to eat at her as she nervously anticipated the evening. She left the house, after saying good-bye to her aunt and uncle, and quickly drove into town.

About half an hour after Margaret left to head over to Heather's house for the camping trip, her Aunt Kate received a call on the telephone.

"Hello," uttered the voice. "This is Ray."

"Well hello, Ray, how are things at your house?"

"It's pretty quiet around here with the house empty," he replied. "I just thought I would call and see how everybody's doing there. Had to check up on my little girl, is she there?"

"Actually," Kate answered. "She just left for the weekend to go camping with one of her friends up here."

"Oh really. She's only been gone a week and already has a new friend up there?"

"Well, she said she knew the girl from high school. She met her at some camp or something they were both involved with during school. You might know of the girl, her name's Carol."

"I can't say that I recall anyone that she knew up there from school," Ray admitted. "Do you know the girl's parents?"

"Oh sure, Ray. The girl's father is our mayor, and her mother's really active in the community as well. Practically the whole town knows who they are. Don't worry, I didn't let her go away with perfect strangers."

"Anyone I know?" Ray asked.

"Todd Whitmore is her father's name. You've never heard of a Carol Whitmore?"

"I don't think so," Ray replied, "but the name Todd Whitmore sounds vaguely familiar. I'm sure I've heard it somewhere before, I just can't place it right now. Maybe Margaret has talked about them before."

“I haven’t seen either of them in person, but Margaret did bring their daughter by here a couple nights back for a horse ride. She seems like a delightful young girl. Margaret and she have been like sisters ever since Margaret tracked her down.”

“That just doesn’t sound like Margaret,” Ray explained. “She’s been talking about coming out there to spend a couple of weeks for months now, but she’s never mentioned trying to find one of her friends from high school.”

“Well, I don’t want to get Margaret in trouble or anything,” Kate assured him, “but she has acted a lot different during this trip. She’s been out on the town looking around an awful lot. I’m not sure what it is that she’s up to, but she seems pretty preoccupied with whatever she’s conjuring up. She’s been quite the little explorer.”

“Well, at least she’s keeping busy and not trying to build another cabin on one of the far corners of your property this time. I guess I’ll give another call later this weekend when she gets back from her camping trip. Who all is she up there with?”

“As it was explained to me, it’s an all girl expedition. Margaret is tagging around with Carol and her mother, and there are a lot of other mothers with their daughters going up also. I talked to Heather last night to make sure of where they were headed and what their plans were.”

“Who’s Heather?” Ray asked in a confused voice.

“She’s Carol’s mother, Heather Whitmore. Maybe Margaret mentioned her?”

“No, but all these names sound so familiar. It’s going to bug me all night if I can’t place where I’ve heard those names before.”

“Well, don’t worry about it, Ray. I’m sure it doesn’t matter now. I promise you, I left Margaret in good hands.”

“I trust you, Kate. I’ll just call back in a couple of days.”

“All right, Ray. You take care now.”

“You, too,” answered the voice right before the click and dial tone came out of the receiver.

Chapter Thirteen

Margaret and Carol set up their tent as soon as they reached the campsite. The caravan of four cars had arrived at the spot about the same time, and the group of women packed their gear in from the road about a half mile. They were the first to the spot, staying ahead of the others. Carol wanted to get the best spot.

The mountains looked beautiful. Margaret understood immediately why this was their special spot. She loved the location of the site. They could hear the sound of waves crashing against the shores of the small lake several hundred yards away. Margaret and Carol passed it on the way to the site. There was something about the lake that she couldn't place, but it seemed almost familiar to her. If it warmed up tomorrow, she would take a dip, she told herself.

The site sat up against the side of the canyon, just slightly above the bottom. It was a small clearing surrounded by thick, dark pines. The trees made it hard to see around them, and that meant there was some exploring to do. The air seemed cooler up here, and the smells of the forest filled the air around them.

Margaret and Carol chose a spot on the edge of the camp, trying to separate themselves from the rest of the group without looking as if that was their intention. The rest of the tents sat closer to the center of the campsite. Heather had decided to bunk up with one of the other mothers.

Margaret realized quite soon what Carol meant when she described the other girls as virtuous. That was Carol's way of saying they were a bunch of spoiled, immature brats. Margaret didn't need to spend much time around them to figure out that. She had no desire to get to know any of them any better. There were five other mothers and nine girls, all younger than Carol and Margaret.

In under an hour's time, the two had their quarters together with all of their gear neatly organized around the tent. Margaret tried to relax for a while, but her sense of adventure got the best of her and she asked Carol if she wanted to go out exploring the area.

Carol seemed equally eager to get away from the camp, and the two girls walked over to where Heather and her bunk mate struggled to get their tent together. Margaret had to hide the smile that forced its way across her face. She could tell that Heather wasn't as adept for the outdoors as she claimed.

"So what are you two doing first?" Heather asked the girls as they walked up to her. She could tell that they were interested in finding something else to do besides sitting around camp.

"I thought I would show Margaret around the mountainside," Carol answered her mother. Carol acted extremely polite around Heather's friends, something probably forced on her at birth, Margaret thought.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea. We’ll be starting dinner in a few hours. I’ll probably be down at the lake fishing once we get this tent together, so if you come back and nobody’s around, you know where to find me.”

“All right, Mrs. Whitmore,” Margaret answered with a smile. “We’ll make sure we make it back before dinner is served.”

The two girls left the camp in a hurry, eager to get away from the other women and talk amongst themselves. Carol led the way, with Margaret keeping up to the excited pace, which the younger girl set. She felt glad to get away from the others. Margaret had looked at this weekend with enthusiasm, but guilt fell upon her shoulders as she remembered her purpose here. She had a hard time facing Heather, even after all that Heather had done to her.

Their path led them back past the lake, which looked like the perfect paradise to Margaret. It was a very large lake, unseen from the road leading to the mountain hideaway, due to its high elevation. Its usual cold water kept it clear of algae and mosses, and it had a fresh, wonderful smell. She could see several fish rising to feed as evening set in.

Margaret remained fairly quiet until they reached the area where Carol stopped abruptly. They were more than half a mile away from the camp, but had paralleled the road quite closely. There was only a short walk down to the base of the gravel. The spot was just a small clearing in the trees.

“This is where I told him to meet me at,” Carol claimed as she looked around at the area, with a sparkle in her eye. “He’ll park just a half mile down the road and hike up until he reaches the campground marker. Then he’ll make his way up to this spot and we’ll meet.”

“It’s a lovely spot,” Margaret agreed. “I bet it’ll be really romantic for the two of you.”

“I can’t thank you enough, Margaret. This weekend is going to be the best.”

“Count on it,” Margaret answered her companion. “I think we’ll all get a lot more out of this weekend than any of us anticipated.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“This really is a beautiful area. Have you and your mom been coming up here for a long time?”

“Since I was old enough to start camping. There’s some great rock climbing up on the ridge to the east.”

“Really,” uttered Margaret with excitement. “I love rock climbing. Take me there, I want to see it.”

“Follow me,” spoke Carol as she took off towards the rocky hills.

The two girls walked for some time before reaching the hills. Carol led the way up a back country trail which was a fairly easy hike. Before long, they had climbed up several hundred feet and came near one of the steep hillsides which sloped heavily, down towards rugged cliffs.

Carol pointed out some of the areas that she had explored before, and Margaret looked on intently. She had brought most of her gear with her, and thought that maybe later she would try repelling off one of the sides. A drop from here would require some effort, even for an experienced climber, and Margaret looked forward to the challenge.

The two girls walked along the side of the cliffs for some time, looking for the perfect spot. While enjoying the scenery, they planned out the course of events for the evening. They talked about how they would sneak away from camp and how Margaret would stand guard so that Carol could have some time alone with her boyfriend. Carol seemed really nervous as they talked, and Margaret knew that she didn't do this sort of thing very often.

The two girls walked on for several more minutes. Margaret had stopped paying attention to the scenery and become lost in her thoughts again, not even paying attention to what Carol talked about. Her mind remained miles away when something out of the corner of her eye startled her. She stopped suddenly and stared over the side of a cliff to the valley floor below. The shock of the sight before her left Margaret speechless.

Carol didn't even notice the condition of her friend. She had stopped to get some water from a canteen and looked off at the setting sun in the distance. Margaret stood perfectly still, trying to understand the view before her.

She had seen this same mountainside from the same spot many times before. The only difference was that it always appeared dark. It was the same picture that had haunted her dreams for years. She stood in wonder, trying to figure out what it all meant. She knew it was a sign of something to come.

Carol looked up at her friend and noticed that the girl's mood had changed considerably. She felt a cold sensation flow through her and wondered what had happened.

"Is something wrong, Margaret?"

"I feel like I've just seen a ghost," Margaret answered.

"Why's that?"

"I'm not sure," answered Margaret. "I just have this feeling."

"Have you seen ghosts before?" Carol teased.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm not one myself."

Carol just laughed at the remark as she looked down over the side of the cliff. Carol grabbed her by the hand, dragging her away from the cliff side. She seemed familiar with the area, and led Margaret a little farther along the ridge to another spot.

"If you have some ropes to anchor yourself with," Carol explained. "There's a way down the side of the mountain. There's a small ledge about thirty feet below us, and some really cool spots for exploring. The only thing is that it's straight down from there, and it isn't easy to maneuver once you're there. That's what the ropes are for."

“The ledge is only about a foot or two wide, but there are a few spots where it widens considerably. The broadest spot is right beneath us. Some of the girls say there was once an eagle’s nest down there, but it’s bare now.

“The spot below is the only place where you can sit down on the ledge, but it isn’t for the faint of heart. You have to hug the mountainside to get to it, and there’s only room for one or two people. I usually crawl along the ledge, but we wear the ropes the entire time. It’s a neat little spot, I ate lunch there once. There’s a splendid view of the area, and it’s pretty cool to sit on a ledge like that. It sounds stupid, but it makes you feel like you’re a hawk or something, and you know that nobody else can get to it but you. You can only reach it if you come at it from the right hand side. The ledge breaks off from the left, and unless you can fly, you can’t get to it from any other direction.”

“So you know the spot pretty well?” Margaret asked.

“Not very.”

“How often have you been down?”

“A few times, but only when Lisa was up here. She’s the only girl who’s daring enough to suggest it. She moved away about two years ago, and nobody’s been down since. You need somebody up top watching the ropes for you. We tried it one day early in the morning, and the ground was still wet from the dew. It’s really hard to get back up without somebody up top to pull you up, besides, you’d have to have pretty good balance to stand anywhere down there for very long, it’s usually really windy.”

“Your mom doesn’t know the area at all?”

“No, just myself and a few other girls know anything about it. Mom would freak out if she knew we messed around up here. I figured that since you’re so into mountain climbing, you might want to try going down there sometime tomorrow.”

“How big of a drop is it after the ledge?”

“It’s quite a ways,” answered Carol. “Probably about one hundred feet.”

“It would be great for repelling then. Maybe if you decide to stick around, I can teach you how.”

“What do you mean if I decide to stick around?” Carol asked, a look of shock upon her face.

“I saw your duffel bag in the tent,” answered Margaret. “Most people wouldn’t bring five sets of nice clothes for a two day camping trip.”

Carol stood quietly beside Margaret for some time. She looked ashamed and couldn’t stare Margaret back in the face. Margaret could tell she felt upset, which made Margaret feel bad for bringing it up, but it was something she needed to know. She worried about her good friend.

“I have to go, Margaret. I just can’t stay around here anymore.”

“Are you sure that’s the answer to your problems?”

“You don’t know the first thing about my family,” Carol explained, tears running down her cheeks. “Sure, they look like the perfect role models on the outside, but I can’t live there anymore. I don’t want to be around the lies anymore. I just have to get away from everything.”

“You know you can’t run off with your boyfriend. That’s the first place your parents will look for you.”

“I’m not that stupid. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that if he’s in town and I disappear, then I probably went off with him. I’ll do better than that though.”

“But why leave your family? You have everything so great here. You don’t know how hard it can be on your own.”

“You don’t know how hard it is to live in that house,” Carol defended. “It’s all a lie. Everything my parents do is a lie. You know the secretary at my dad’s office? He’s been having an affair with her for several months now. Before her, there were others, but my mom’s so wrapped up in how everybody looks up to her, that she doesn’t even see it.”

Margaret stood speechlessly as her young friend broke down in front of her. She hadn’t realized that the girl knew anything about her parents, but she knew how right Carol was, Carol had lived with them all her life. Margaret didn’t try to stop the outpour. She knew Carol needed to get her feelings out in the open, to make sure it was the right thing to do.

“Besides, my mom’s just as bad as my father is,” Carol continued. “That’s if he’s my real father, I’m not really sure. The main reason she’s never noticed his affairs is that she’s too busy throwing herself at every man she can get to notice her. Mrs. Brunswick? Mrs. Davis? Mrs. Wilson? All of them women with extremely masculine voices that call to speak with my mother about community business.

“She has to make special dates with each of them to discuss issues of public interest. Yet, I’ve never met a single one of them. All of her other friends come over to the house to play cards or go out to restaurants for lunch, but what about all the others who she sometimes spends hours with for lunch? I’ve heard what my mom talks about at her bridge gatherings, and I’ve never heard any pressing political issues. She doesn’t even discuss politics with my dad, and she has no real power in the community.”

“I didn’t think you knew?” Margaret answered with a look of surprise.

“Who wouldn’t know? I’m sure you know all about it. I didn’t think I’d even see you again after you went to get your purse from my dad’s office.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what was going on in there. You could probably hear her from the waiting room. They’re so obvious about it. My dad doesn’t even try to hide it anymore. It’s like he doesn’t care if he gets caught.

“Most of my friends, when they figure out what’s going on, don’t ever come around anymore. It makes people really nervous. Most of the friends I’ve had don’t last a week after they figure it out. Then there’s my mother. Most people can’t stand to listen to her for more than a few minutes. Everybody thinks I’m just as snobby as she is.

“My mother’s already embarrassed two of the girls that came over to our house the other night for movies. I can’t keep any of the friends I make, because they don’t like being around my family. After a while, it’s easier to ignore me than to bother with my parents. I hate living here.”

“I never realized you felt this strongly about it. I thought you liked living with your parents.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Carol answered. “To be honest with you, I truly don’t understand how you get along with my mother so well. It seems almost strange to me that you like her as much as you do. You and she are total opposites.”

“Sometimes you just have to look deeper into the situation. Things aren’t always what they seem.”

“With my parents, things are never what they seem.”

“So where will you go?”

“I have a friend who graduated from school a year ago. Her name’s Janet. She’s going to college down south. She’s pretty good friends with Rich too. We’ve had the whole thing set up for months now. We’ve just been looking for the right moment. This camping trip was the only obstacle standing in our way, and you’ve helped me find a way to make it the right moment to leave.”

“But what about giving up your last two years of high school? Don’t let it stop you from your education.” Margaret had enough guilt on her conscience, and didn’t want any additional burdens added to her shoulders.

“I can go to school down south. I won’t give up school, just the environment I’ve wanted to escape from for years. It will be a new beginning for me. When I’m of age, I’ll get married, if I’m ready of course, and it still feels right. It feels like the right thing at this point of my life. I need to make sure that I’m really in love with him, and not using him as an escape route. I want it to be real. I won’t see Rich until things have calmed down around here. Tonight’s probably the last time I’ll see him for several months.

Everything is set up. I even have my note written. I told them I’m running off to California to try to get into modeling. My mom will believe that. She always wanted to be a model.”

“What happens when the police come looking for you?”

“I told you it’s already taken care of. Janet is driving me down to Georgia as soon as I get over the state line. That keeps Rich out of it, because he’ll be back in Harrison with a solid alibi.

I'll have a fake ID made as soon as I get there. Janet's aunt will help me register for school and I'll color my hair blonde and get it cut as soon as I get there. They'll be looking for me on the other side of the continent, and they'll be looking for a runaway, not a kidnapped child. They don't look as hard for runaways, because runaways don't want to be found. I'm seventeen, and I doubt the police will even bother looking for me."

"I guess you have everything planned out."

"Yeah," assured Carol in a weary voice. "That is, if you don't plan to warn my mother about it."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Margaret assured her in a tone reflecting her honesty. "What are friends for anyway? As a matter of fact, you take all the time you need tonight. I'll make sure your mother doesn't even notice you're gone until tomorrow."

"I guess I should warn you," Carol explained. "I'm taking her car so that Rich doesn't get in any kind of trouble. I don't want it to look like I had any help with this. I'll drop the car off at a bus station when I cross the state line."

We'll sabotage the other vehicles down at camp so that nobody can come after us until late tomorrow afternoon. It's about fifteen miles to the closest phone. By that time, I should be crossing into Georgia."

"It will be the most enjoyable hike I've ever done. We'd better get back to camp before they get worried about us. I just want you to know, Carol, you're one of the nicest girls I've ever met. You'll make new friends quickly, and you won't have a hard time keeping them. Give me a call after you're settled with your new husband, or your new life. Your friendship means a lot to me. I hope everything works out for you."

"Thanks, Margaret. I don't think I could have gone through with this if I hadn't met you. Thank you, for everything."

Heather sat near the fire as some of the other campers dished up dinner for all those in the camp. She sat alone, Carol had plates for both of them and stood in the food line. Margaret walked over beside her at the empty fire.

"Hello, Mrs. Whitmore," Margaret spoke.

"Hi, Margaret. So what do you think of our little camping spot?"

"It's wonderful. It has everything anyone could need."

"Well, almost everything," answered Heather in an insinuating voice. Margaret hated it when she did this. Heather tried to fit in with everyone, no matter what generation they were from. Margaret just couldn't figure out why Heather believed that everyone thought about sex all hours of the day. "But it's a wonderful place. Are you and Carol having a good time? You've been making yourselves pretty scarce."

“We’ve been talking.”

“I feel like Carol’s upset with me,” Heather spoke quietly. “She hasn’t been herself lately.”

“I’m sure she’ll get over it. She’s very proud of her parents. You’re practically all she ever talks about. She just feels a little bit trapped.”

“A child needs her parents to watch out for her. That’s one of the biggest responsibilities a mother has. I just want what’s best for her interests. She’ll understand someday. Right now, I’m just glad she has somebody like you to depend on.”

“Well thank you, Mrs. Whitmore, but I don’t look at myself as a guidance counselor. I really like Carol. She’s a good friend. If I give her any advice, it’s as a friend. I want what’s best for her too.”

“It’s really peaceful up here, don’t you think, Margaret?”

“It’s great, somewhere you can go to just escape all the complexities of life. It must be hard, being the mayor’s wife, with all the work involved and the social image you have to maintain. A person could get really wrapped up in it all and forget about the important things.”

“You’re absolutely right, Margaret. That’s what I love about this place. It’s somewhere that you can go to spend some time alone and work out what’s bothering you, and then get your prerogatives back in order.”

“Like your family,” agreed Margaret. “There’s nothing as valuable in this world. I know I can’t wait until I meet the right guy and can start my own family. I have always wanted to experience the joy of mothering a child, to feel it grow inside. I want to have the opportunity to care for, nourish and love it. Then look out for it throughout its life, and share in its failures and accomplishments.”

“It’s one of the most rewarding jobs in the world, being a mother,” Heather agreed. “I bet you’ll make an excellent mother, Margaret, but don’t go rushing into everything. Make sure you meet the right man first. You can’t have a fulfilling life without the right man as the head of your family.”

Margaret smiled at Heather as she stood up and walked over to the food line. Carol looked back at her, not sure what she had talked with Heather about. Margaret winked back at Carol and gave her a warm grin.

Margaret and Carol monitored their watches carefully. Both girls couldn’t sleep from the excitement brewing inside them, but the source of their excitement stemmed from different feelings.

Carol knew that in less than an hour she would free herself from the tight grip her parents had held on her. From the screen door of the tent, she could see the tent where her mother slept.

It all seemed different now, the void between them grew rapidly. Soon the distance would turn into thousands of miles.

Margaret's anticipation of what would happen during the rest of the weekend had completely turned around. Carol's leaving had shattered her idea of bringing her past out into the open during an evening camp fire. There was nothing she could do until Carol was miles away, she didn't want to hurt Carol's chances of escape.

Margaret questioned her intentions even now, as she set it up in her mind. Heather's life would lie in shambles tomorrow, even if she did nothing. Her friends would not take Carol's running away lightly, and gossip would soon spread. This just made Margaret more sure of herself. Carol wouldn't be here to witness anything, which eased Margaret's tensions a bit. This all helped her formulate her plan more easily.

The camp had remained silent for more than half an hour now, and the calmness convinced the two that everyone was in a deep sleep. They gently climbed out of their sleeping bags, and silently grabbed the gear they had set up inside their tent.

The girls moved slowly, making sure not to make very much noise in their movements. After a good length of time, they were finally on the trail towards the lake. Margaret carried a small pack on her shoulders and Carol had a large duffel bag.

The midnight air felt cold and damp. The smell of a storm filled their noses, and only a fraction of the bright light from the full moon blanketed the ground where they walked. Margaret felt a chill run down her spine, but seemed unsure if it came from the temperature, or another source.

The hike was a quiet one, each girl with her thoughts wound up in different problems. Both realized it was the last time they would ever see one another. They had become close friends, but their goals made it easy to say good-bye to one another. Carol still didn't understand Margaret's interests here, but it didn't seem to bother her at all. Carol lived her life for herself now.

"I left the note on my sleeping bag," Carol informed Margaret once they were a good distance from the camp. "Just tell my mom that you found it when you woke up in the morning. Tell her I snuck out while you were asleep. I'll be long gone before daybreak."

"I understand," Margaret assured her.

The two reached the spot where they meant to meet Carol's boyfriend. They could see somebody sitting on a fallen tree where they planned the rendezvous to take place. Carol broke into a run as a voice from the person called out to her. Margaret had never seen such excitement in the girl.

Margaret stood a short distance away from the joyous couple. She decided to stand back and give them some room. After several seconds, the two broke their embrace and Carol turned to acknowledge Margaret.

Margaret greeted Richard with a handshake and quickly decided to get some information from him. She wanted to make sure that he could pull it all off. She didn't want Carol to come back after the events she had planned for later. The plan was still taking shape in her head, but she felt sure that she didn't want any witnesses.

"So what happens now?"

"We have a car waiting down by the road," Rich explained. "I borrowed it from a friend for the evening. Janet is waiting in the car right now. I'll just spend a few minutes here with Carol, then I'll take her to Janet.

"The three of us will drive up to where all the cars are parked. Carol will take her mom's car and drive it over the state line so that it looks like she ran away by herself. They'll leave it at a bus station, so it looks like Carol did everything on her own. My friend will accompany her on the ride and then they'll change vehicles and abandon her mom's car there. That will make it harder for anyone to trace Carol's movements. All this will happen before daybreak.

"Meanwhile, I'll sabotage all the cars left at the bottom of the trail. I'll probably just cut the fuel hoses and take a decent length of the hose so they can't just mend it back together. Then I'll drive back down into town where my alibi is waiting. As long as Carol has the keys, we're all set."

"The spare keys are in my pocket," Carol assured him. "Now I don't want you to worry," Carol told Margaret. "I'll be just fine. If we do get caught, I won't even bring up your name. As far as everyone knows, you have no idea of what's going on here. I tricked you, and you're a deep sleeper."

"You take good care of yourself," Margaret told her friend. "Don't worry about anything back here. I'll make sure things on this end go smoothly. If you ever need anything, you have my number. I hope things work out better for you at your new home."

"Thank you, Margaret, you're the best," Carol replied to her friend as she gave Margaret a hug. The smile on her face told Margaret that this was right for her.

"I'll leave you two alone for a while now," Margaret told the two. "I know how much these few minutes alone mean to you. I'll be up at the top of the trail, making sure nobody comes down here looking for you."

Margaret gave her one last smile, and she walked back up the trail and sat down to take a breather. She looked up at the sky, feeling the dampness all around her. She wondered if she felt happy for Carol, or because she was out of the picture now. The light from the full moon slowly dimmed as the clouds began to filter out the brightness.

Margaret could smell the musty odor of the storm as it moved in over the area. The wind had kicked up and she knew she needed to get started before the weather got any worse. The storm assured her of what she had to do, and she now knew exactly what her next step was.

She looked back at the clearing where Carol and Rich stood. The two held one another in a long embrace. She knew they would not see one another for some time, so she turned, leaving the two with their privacy.

Margaret started up the trail to the camp. She felt relieved that things had worked out so well for Carol. She didn't want her new friend around for what would happen. Nothing more stood between Heather and herself now, and confrontation grew inevitable.

She picked up several items from the camp, checking to make sure that everyone was still where they should be. She didn't want anyone wandering off and realizing that Carol was gone. Margaret got what she needed and started back up to the cliffs that Carol had shown her earlier in the day. She could tell by the dark clouds moving in that a heavy storm drew near.

The wind at the top of the mountain blew furiously as the storm began to unleash its force on the area. The brilliant flashes of lightning around her reminded Margaret of her dream as she looked over the edge of the mountainside. She flipped on the powerful flashlight to get a good look in the dark. The momentary flashes of light lit up the surrounding area, but didn't help her pinpoint the rock face below.

Even with the flashlight, Margaret couldn't make out the ledge beneath her. She knew that it was down there though, Carol had assured her of it. She pulled her ropes from the pack she carried and found a solid tree to use as an anchor.

She wondered what could drive herself to stand on a ledge in the middle of a lightning storm, like this. The recollection of her beginning and end with Heather was all it took to wipe that thought from her mind. There were others like herself, whose paths hadn't crossed the same fortune when the choice was made. She did this for herself, and for them.

Margaret pulled out her harness and climbed into it. She attached the harness to the rope and tossed the rope over the side of the cliff. After putting on her gloves to protect her hands, Margaret started down the mountain in search of the ledge. The wind had kicked up and she had a hard time keeping her footings. It would take much strength to climb back up to the top.

Margaret fought her way to the ledge and let out some of the slack in her rope, giving herself more mobility to walk along the ledge. She needed to locate the spot Carol had mentioned before. She ventured out across the footing, trying to keep her balance the best she could and avoid using the rope, but it was almost impossible, just as Carol had told her.

Margaret found the spot where the ledge widened considerably. It almost looked like a cave inside the rock, and was impossible to see from the top of the cliff, which hung over thirty

feet above. The only problem was that the ledge between the cave and where Margaret needed to go, grew too narrow to walk across.

The large overhang above her made it hard for a person to get over to the spot, even with the aid of the ropes. Carol had told her there was a way down to the ledge, but she wanted to explore this route first. Margaret had found the dead end which could only supply a person with a view of the spot Carol spoke of. The only way out was back up the hill.

She climbed up the side of the mountain, using the rope and her immense arm strength to pull herself to the top. The task was a hard one, even for an experienced mountain climber like herself. The wind had kicked up considerably, and it tossed her around as she fought her way to the top. She left the rope hanging over the ledge and tied another rope to the same anchor.

Margaret walked farther across the ridge to the path which Carol had told her about. She found a long vertical crack along the side of the hill, which led directly down to the ledge. She knew immediately that this was the way to get to the cave.

Margaret neared the camp about an hour later. She finished setting everything up and took a longer route back so she could make sure Carol had left. Heather's car had vanished, and by now they had probably driven to the highway. Within an hour they would reach the state line. Something inside her told Margaret that her friend would make it.

Margaret stopped outside the camp to clear her mind. This did little to calm her as it released a haunting thought in her head. Heather's life looked pretty bad now, but she had nothing to do with that really. Margaret did this for herself, and she told herself it was the only way.

She took several minutes to prepare mentally for what she had to do. A light rain began to fall and the coolness of the water against her feverish skin relaxed her. After a few minutes, she took off at a dead run towards the camp.

Margaret reached the camp and ran quickly to the tent where Heather lay sleeping. She tapped Heather gently on the shoulder and brought her finger up to her lips, signaling Heather to keep quiet.

Heather opened her eyes and saw the girl standing above her. Margaret clasped her hand over Heather's mouth, so she wouldn't wake anyone. Heather realized by the look on Margaret's face, that something terrible had happened. Margaret indicated to her to come out of the tent so that they could talk in private.

Heather stepped out from the tent, dressed in her warm long underwear. She had on a tank top and shorts over top of the insulated clothing, and she looked funny standing outside in the moonlight. Her feet quickly became soiled in the slippery mud.

Margaret led her far enough away from the tents so that nobody else in the area could hear what she said. Heather noticed Margaret limping on one of her legs as they walked. She stopped Margaret before they got very far and asked what had happened.

“It’s Carol,” Margaret explained in a panicked voice. “She couldn’t sleep and wanted to go for a walk. We left about half an hour ago. She hasn’t been the same since we left the camp. She’s all freaked out and she won’t move. I thought maybe you could come talk with her.”

“Sure,” answered Heather. “Where is she?”

“In the mountains, near the cliffs.”

“In the storm?”

“It’s worse. I don’t think she’s stable.”

“Let me go wake up Susan, in case we need any help.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea or not,” urged Margaret.

“Why?”

“Carol broke down tonight and told me everything,” Margaret began. “She’s pregnant, and has been for over a month now. She thinks you’ll be upset with her.”

“Where is she now?”

“She took me up into the cliffs,” explained Margaret. “She said she wanted to explore some of the ledges. There’s a spot up there you can only reach if you go down with a rope. She made me bring my gear with us. We left before the storm moved in. I thought it was some kind of midnight hike. We got down onto the ledge. That’s when she freaked out. I’m scared, Heather. I don’t know what she’s thinking.”

“Is she there now?” Heather asked, her voice full of panic.

“Once we got down on the ledge, she broke down and told me everything. She was acting really strange and making me nervous. Then she passed out on the ledge. She keeps drifting in and out of consciousness. When she’s alert, she just sits there moaning the word mommy and won’t budge.

“I was afraid she might try something drastic. I thought you would want to keep things quiet about this, for everyone’s sake. If you want to, I’ll go wake up some of the others to go with us. I hurt my leg getting down onto the ledge. I can’t pull her up by myself if we need to, and I can’t get back down again. It would be nice to have some others with us.”

“No,” answered Heather sternly. “You just get me up there, and I’ll talk to her and calm her down. We can do this without having to embarrass anybody. Let me go put some shoes on, and then we’ll go ahead. Will you be all right walking there?”

Margaret couldn’t believe that Heather didn’t want others to know about her daughter. Her social status overpowered her reasoning, even when her daughter’s life was at stake. Then

again, that's how Margaret had planned it. Maybe her subconscious had made her do it, to test Heather one last time.

"Sure," answered Margaret. Heather went quickly and quietly back to her tent and grabbed a change of clothes for the hike. Several minutes later, the two left the camp.

Heather Whitmore looked over the side of the steep hillside where Margaret had guided her. With the light rain and penetrating moonlight, she could see part of the ledge below the overhang, where the water ran off the side. The full moon made it possible to see the bottom of the cliff. A fall would drop a person over one hundred feet down the mountainside. Heather Whitmore had a severe fear of heights.

"Carol, are you all right?" Margaret yelled as loud as she could. She grabbed a hold of one of the two ropes tied to separate trees at the top of the hill. "She's still there," Margaret announced as she tugged gently on the rope.

"I tied this rope to her harness, in case she passed out again and rolled near the ledge. We can use it to pull her up if you can't talk any sense into her. I don't want to tug on it, in case it makes her nervous and she tries to cut it. She was passed out when I left her."

"I can't see her down there," remarked Heather in a concerned voice.

"She's beneath the overhang," Margaret explained. "You'll only be able to see the spot from the ledge. The only way to the ledge where she's at is to come at it from the side. I'll climb down to the ledge, and then walk to the ledge where she's sitting."

Margaret strapped her harness to the rope. She checked the secureness of the tightly anchored rope, which she had tied to the tree trunk, and walked to the edge of the cliff. Heather could still see her favoring one of her legs.

"No, Margaret," stopped Heather. "You can't go down there on your ankle. I should go down and talk to her now. Give me the harness."

"But I'm the one who helped her get down there, Mrs. Whitmore. I should be the one who gets her back up. You don't know the first thing about climbing."

"I went rappelling once years ago," Heather announced, almost proudly, "and besides, I'm her mother. You stay here and keep an eye on the rope," she insisted as she held her hand out to the harness which Margaret wore. Margaret slipped out of it and handed it to the woman. She almost felt the urge to laugh as she watched the confident woman take the rope. Margaret never took her climbing lightly, but rarely boasted about her abilities. She felt satisfied as she watched her unknowing quarry climb into the device.

"Relax, Carol," Heather yelled as she locked the harness securely to the rope and started over the edge of the cliff. "Mom's here now. Everything will be all right. I'm coming down to help you, sweetheart."

Margaret helped Heather start down the side of the mountain. She showed Heather the way to use the ropes and friction to lower herself down slowly. Heather didn't even ask how she would get back up. She flipped on the flashlight and shone it on the rock, trying to get an idea of her surroundings. Margaret could see the heavy winds, amplified by the sheer ledge, tossing Heather around like a rag doll.

The rain had begun to intensify, and occasional brilliant flashes of lightning, followed by deafening thunder, sounded about her. Heather struggled on the way down, trying to move quickly. Her inexperience left her quite vulnerable in the blowing wind and heavy rains.

Heather reached the ledge about thirty feet below, and tried to get her footing on the wet surface. She hugged the wall tightly, and let a little slack out of the rope so she could walk along the ledge to where Margaret indicated Carol was. She shone the light over in the direction and could see what looked like somebody all rolled up in a ball just a short distance away.

She couldn't make out the mound clearly, and crept closer towards it, clinging to the rope for safety. She noticed the ledge growing smaller and smaller as she got closer to what she thought was her daughter. The ledge dropped off completely before she could reach the spot, and she tried to figure out how Carol had gotten over there.

Heather shone the flashlight against the wall, and then up above her, but she couldn't find anything to hang onto. She switched off the light, and looked down at the valley beneath her. A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the entire valley, and the sight of the drop below caused her stomach to turn as she lost her balance. She clung to the rope tightly, trying to steady herself and regain her composure.

Finally, after getting stable on the wet surface again, she shone the light over to where she thought her daughter sat. The rain couldn't strike her directly from beneath the overhang, and she could see much more clearly now. She called out her daughter's name, turning the flashlight on to see under the overhang just as another brilliant flash from behind her lit up the entire side of the mountain. Heather realized something was wrong as the echoing clash of thunder reached her ears.

Utter shock and disbelief came over Heather as she recognized what the heap tied to the harness was. She stood silently for a moment as she looked carefully over the black bag of camp garbage a few feet beyond her grasp. She looked around, searching for a sign of her daughter, but couldn't see her anywhere.

"She isn't here," Heather yelled up in a confused and frightened voice. She looked over the side of the cliff for a sign of the girl at the bottom of the canyon.

"Sure she is," Margaret answered from above her. Heather looked up and could see Margaret's face staring out from the overhang thirty feet above her. Margaret held a length of the

rope tied to the bag in her hand where Heather could see it. “She’s sitting right there in front of you,” Margaret continued.

“It’s just a sack of garbage, Margaret,” Heather yelled back, becoming upset in the cold rain. Margaret remained still, her face expressionless.

“You’re right, what was I thinking?” yelled Margaret in an odd voice. Heather sensed a new tone in Margaret’s speech, one she had never heard before. The tone frightened Heather.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Whitmore,” Margaret continued. “I get things mixed up sometimes. I mean, garbage and children, let me see, the garbage is the stuff we throw away because it doesn’t really matter, right?”

Heather watched with surprise as Margaret tossed a burlap bag filled with rocks off the side of the cliff with her free hand. The bag was tied to a length of rope which followed behind on its descent. Heather saw Margaret release her grip on the rope in her other hand and then realized that the two lengths Margaret had held were segments of the same rope.

The bag dropped down past Heather and jerked the sack of garbage off the ledge beside her. She watched the two bags in the moonlight as they descended down the cliff and hit the bottom of the canyon many feet below.

“That’s a pretty good drop to the bottom, huh?” Margaret asked. Her voice sounded emotionless, but there was a certain fire in her eyes.

“What did you do with my daughter?” Heather yelled up in a frantic voice.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Whitmore, this is a new side of you, and I’m not sure how to respond to it. I wasn’t sure if you really cared about your children or not. This is between you and me now, Carol’s nowhere near here. She went on a walk all right, but by herself, she’s out of the picture now. Oh, she isn’t pregnant either. I told you she was a bright girl. She isn’t in any sort of trouble. She’s much more sensible than her mother was.”

“Then why did you drag me up here to play your silly little joke? I didn’t find it the least bit funny. You scared me to death!”

“Oh, I haven’t begun to show you scared yet,” Margaret replied from above, “but we’ll get to all of that in time. As long as we’re up here, let’s talk about another member of your family.”

“Whom do you want to talk about?”

“You’re husband,” Margaret answered. “You talk as if he’s the greatest lover in the world.”

“He’s a great lover, but then that isn’t any of your business, now is it?”

“I didn’t think he was anything to brag about.”

“Excuse me?” yelled Heather from below, not believing what she had just heard.

“I got almost no satisfaction from him.”

“What are you talking about, Margaret?”

“Why didn’t you find a guy with a little more to offer a woman, if you know what I mean? I would think with all the guys you’ve had during your life, you could have done much better than that. Why did you settle for such a poor excuse for a man? I bet my dad was a lot better.”

“Margaret, quit talking nonsense. I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m soaking wet and really tired, and I don’t need to hear more lies on top of this. Now if you’re finished with your little joke...”

“I’m not lying, Mrs. Whitmore. I’ve witnessed your husband firsthand, and this is no joke.”

Margaret’s voice still had little emotion, and Heather felt something terrible would happen. She prided herself on keeping cool under pressure, and knew that she had to keep her cool now. She felt sure that Margaret was bluffing, and decided to call the bluff for what it was worth.

“All right, Margaret, I’m beginning to understand now. You want my husband. You think that by telling me these lies, you’ll make me want to leave him. Well, I’m not buying it at all. My husband’s always been faithful, his conscience wouldn’t allow him to cheat.”

“Not even a good guess, Heather. I just told you, your husband isn’t anything to brag about. He’s the last thing of yours that I want. I didn’t do it for myself, really. I wanted you to understand what a loser he is, but then you probably already know that. I mean you’ve been having sex with him for years. I don’t even know why I did it now as I look back on things. I don’t blame you for all your affairs. I’m sure that if he was all I ever got to make love to, I would look elsewhere also.”

Margaret didn’t know why she said it, but she wanted to test Heather. She knew the only way to scare Heather, was to show her that she could think in the same manner. The only person who could get to Heather, was someone just like her, and Margaret wanted to get to Heather. She wanted Heather angry before she carried her plan through.

“And where did this take place, Margaret?”

“Just last week at your house,” Margaret answered coolly. “While we were in his study and you were bringing in groceries from the car outside. He was telling me about the fringe benefits of a life in politics. He demonstrated just how he got voted into office. I didn’t enjoy it near as much as his secretary does, wow, can she scream. I know it’s probably no shock to you, but if you don’t believe me, just ask him. I’m sure he’d love to tell you all about it. I know he enjoyed it, but I thought it was pretty lame.

“If you wouldn’t have been in the kitchen while it was all going on, I don’t think I would have gotten any thrill from it at all. The only thrill I really got was from the fear of being caught.

You know all about the thrill of doing something you really shouldn't, don't you? I wonder, are your wild sexual interludes with all your lovers more enjoyable now that you're married, and you have that fear of being caught?"

"I don't buy it, Margaret," yelled Heather from below.

Margaret waited for a moment, but found she had grown tired of trying to upset Heather. She kept her calm, but Margaret had lost her patience.

"Why would I lie to a woman who's about to meet her death?"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's just you and I now, except that I'm the one who's at the other end of the lifeline now. It's a little game I like to call role reversal. You like playing games, don't you, Heather?"

Margaret held out Heather's rope so that she could see it over the edge of the cliff. Heather could see the other end of her rope in Margaret's free hand. It was tied to a large burlap bag filled with rocks, identical to the one she had dropped moments earlier.

"Margaret!" screamed Heather as she searched for something to hang onto, "what are you doing?"

"I'm preparing to cut you off from the lifeline," explained Margaret calmly.

"You'll kill me?"

"I don't like the word kill, it sounds so terrible. I'm not going to kill you, I'm just aborting you."

"Margaret, what are you talking about? I don't understand."

"No, you wouldn't, would you, mom?" Margaret's voice showed signs of emotion now.

"I don't know what's going on here, Margaret, but why don't I come up there so we can talk. You've scared me, are you satisfied?"

Margaret slowly lowered a portion of the rope tied to the burlap bag down towards Heather and began to swing it away from the mountainside.

"Margaret, please stop," begged Heather from below.

"What's it like to feel your life slipping away, knowing you have no control of your destiny?"

"What do you want from me?" yelled Heather back up, her shoes began to slip on the wet surface.

"I'm wondering if you'll make as great of a clatter when you hit the valley floor as that bag of garbage did."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Don't you remember, mom?"

"Remember what?"

"Don't you remember me? Don't you, mom?"

“Why do you keep calling me mom?”

“Does the number ‘87’ enlighten your memory at all?”

“Should it?” asked Heather.

“He’s my father, mom.”

“We never had a child.”

“Why mom? Did you kill it?”

“Who the hell are you to judge me. That was a long time ago. My abortions were supposed to be kept confidential. I don’t know how you ...”

“Why did you do it, mom?” Margaret interrupted, her eyes in tears. “Why did you just throw me away like that?”

“What,” screamed Heather in fear for her life. She could see Margaret’s grip on the bag relaxing. “Do you want me to justify my abortions to you? I don’t owe you any explanations.”

“Did I mean that little to you?”

“I was young,” screamed Heather, pleading with the emotional girl above her. “I wasn’t ready to have a child yet. There were still so many things I wanted to do with my life. I had to have an abortion. It was all very innocent, nobody was hurt by it.”

“Nobody?! What about the child? What about me, mom?”

“You’re not my child, Margaret. There were no children, they never existed. They were never alive.”

“Well, I guess if I never existed, then my mother never really existed either. We both know that a child can’t exist without a mother. So I don’t really exist, do I?”

“Margaret, you’re just a little bit confused now. I don’t know how you found out about my abortions, but they’re none of your business. You shouldn’t let yourself get so worked up about a simple abortion. The choice was mine to make. Now help me back up, and we’ll talk this over like rational adults.”

“Do you still think that those children never existed?”

“No, they were just abortions.”

“So then, I’m not really destroying you, because I never existed. In all actuality, I’m not responsible for you falling off this ledge, you are. Let’s go through with the abortion now, mom.”

“Margaret, no,” Heather screamed as she watched in horror.

Margaret released her grip on the burlap bag and it bounced off the cliff wall on its way down past Heather. Heather grabbed at the wall, trying to find something to hang onto, but lost her balance with her frantic movements. Her feet slipped out from under her on the wet surface as she grabbed excitedly for something to stop her fall.

Heather dropped from the ledge and plummeted towards the valley below. She glanced up at the face of the young girl above her as she realized her life was no longer in her own hands. The feeling of utter loss filled her heart and she fell powerlessly towards the ground below.

The fall ended abruptly as the harness tightened up against the rope and stopped the fall. The jerk spun Heather around and she saw the end of the rope, tied to the burlap bag, drift past her on its descent to the bottom.

Heather looked up to where Margaret sat, still looking down at her. Margaret's hand no longer held the rope, but it remained there, still anchored to the tree at the top of the cliff. Then Heather realized that it was just a trick.

Hanging on the rope, her composure lost, she began to cry helplessly. She looked back up at Margaret for some sort of explanation, but the expression on the girl's face had not changed.

"Your daughter was right," Margaret yelled down to Heather. "There's a big difference between you and I. I place a value on every life, no matter how small or unworthy. I didn't want to kill you. I just wanted you to understand what you did, mom."

Margaret began to say something else, but stopped suddenly as the firm grip came to rest on her shoulder. She turned suddenly, startled by the intrusion, and gazed up into the soft blue eyes above her.

"What are you doing here?" Margaret asked the older man standing above her.

"Come on, Margaret," Raymond replied. "It's all over now. Let's help her back up."

"Let her pull herself up. Let her experience the struggle I had to go through."

"I was there to help you when your life depended on it," Ray explained to his daughter. "The situation is no different now. Give me a hand, Margaret. She understands now."

Margaret remained silent. She turned around and grabbed a hold of the rope, starting to pull Heather back up to the top of the mountain. In a short time, Heather reached up for help over the top of the ledge.

Heather's hand clasped Dr. Drake's as he pulled her over the side of the hill to the flat land above. Heather looked him over for some time before she recognized the man from her past.

"Dr. Drake?" Heather asked, completely confused.

"I'm really sorry about all this. You both probably have a lot of questions to ask me, and I know this is all my fault. I didn't want things to turn out like this. I thought what I was doing was right. Now I see that I was wrong to hide the truth from you both.

"Heather, I would like you to meet my daughter, Margaret. Margaret was surgically removed from your womb during the third abortion which I performed for you. I and a colleague of mine, Dr. Penn, placed her inside what we called an L.S.A.U., or life sustaining artificial uterus. The remainder of the pregnancy was finished inside this device.

“We kept the procedure a secret from everyone involved. Margaret must have stumbled upon it and come searching for you. I never intended for any of this to happen, but I’m glad it did. I’m tired of carrying these secrets around with me.”

Heather looked at Margaret with amazement. Margaret didn’t look up from where she stood staring at her feet. Ray could tell that she felt ashamed for what she had done. Her tears fell more steadily now, as the realization of her actions ripped at her emotions.

“It’s all right, Margaret,” he assured her as he reached out and put his arm around her to comfort her. “I should have been more careful with the information. I didn’t know how you would react to it. I should have told you the truth long ago. You were ready to hear it.”

“You mean she’s my daughter?” Heather asked, trying to make sense of the situation.

“No,” Ray answered sternly. “She’s my daughter. You aborted her.”

“How did you find me?” Margaret asked, her eyes in tears.

“I finally realized where I knew the name Todd Whitmore from, and I called your friend Amy. She told me about your venture through my files. Your aunt told me you had been spending a lot of time with his daughter. I didn’t figure it all out until I saw Heather in the family picture when I visited him. He seems pretty shook up. He told me how to get up here. Then I followed your footsteps in the mud.”

“How do you know Todd?” Heather asked.

“He’s the father of a child I delivered for somebody else, eighteen years ago. I told him all about it. I’m sure he’d love to explain it to you when you see him tomorrow. He’s really upset right now.”

Ray looked down at his daughter. She wept uncontrollably, and he knew it was time to leave. He looked over at Heather and nodded a good-bye, then turned around and led his daughter away from the edge of the cliff.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he told Margaret. “Let’s go home.”

Ray and Margaret walked away from Heather, leaving her with the climbing gear. She didn’t follow right away, but stood staring off into the cold, wet night.

Margaret finally sat down with her journal the next evening.

“... My father brought me home early this morning. We left the note from Carol to her mother in Heather’s tent last night, and I explained most of my ordeal to my father this afternoon. He’s been really supportive of me.

My mother and he sat down for several hours talking about my options now. I saw Amy this morning and told her about the trip to Harrison. She’s been a good person to rely on, and was interested to hear about Todd Whitmore. Her mom finally sat down and told her about him when she learned about our venture through my dad’s files.

I didn't realize how messed up I was until I arrived home and had some time to think about things. I really regret some of my actions during the past week, but I'm glad I finally faced Heather. I made some mistakes which won't be easy to live with, but I felt that Heather should know the truth.

Now comes the hard part. My father told me about Edward Penn, and how he wanted to come forth with the results of this project if it were successful. I'll meet with Mrs. Penn soon. He explained some of the scenarios which could happen if we go public, and things could get ugly. Dad hasn't pressured me at all, and the choice is mine to make.

Oh, did I mention that Richard Nelson wrote me from Nevada..."