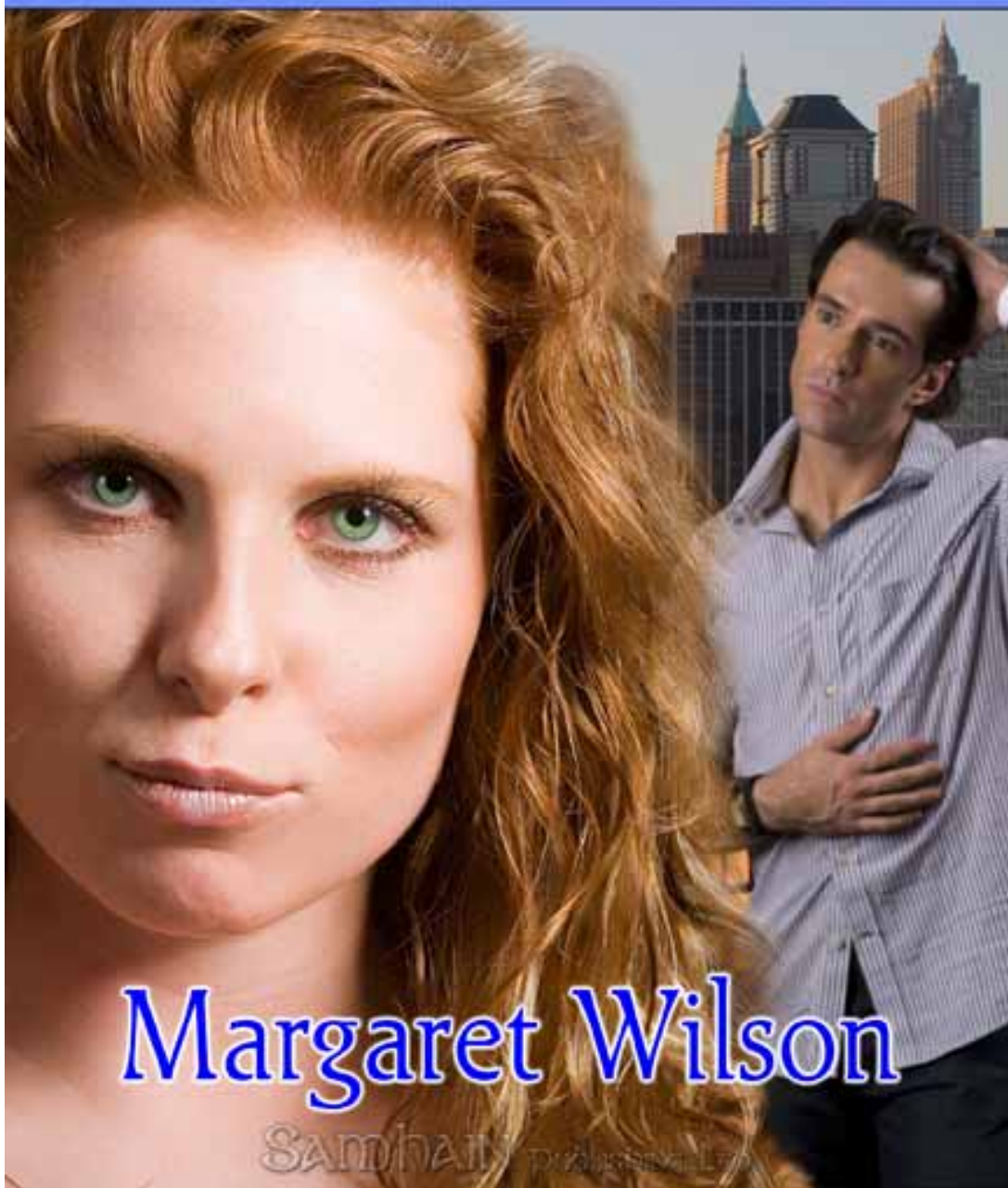


Ellie's DREAM



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Ellie's Dream

Margaret Wilson

Dedication

To my dear friend, Vicki Gaia, who reads innumerable drafts, has amazing ideas, and whose writing inspires me.

Prologue

Kit Miller drove fast. The engine purred as the speedometer needle slid to ninety. The car was a black Camaro, new, a present to himself to celebrate his retirement from football. After a knee injury during the play-off game against the Miami Dolphins, Kit gave up his dream of a Super Bowl ring and decided to move on to the next phase of his life. Football had been good to him. He was well off, relatively healthy and had a semi-celebrity status that came in handy. He headed home to Buffalo now, to his family. They had taken the news of his retirement well, even though his father's prestige at the Elk's Lodge would drop some. His mother had been relieved, no more worrying about him every time he took to the field.

They wouldn't like what he had to tell them now, the reason for the weekend trip home, but he was tired of living a double life, tired of lying to everyone, including himself. He'd spent fifteen years in the closet. Past time to come out. He planned to see his sister Ellie first. His best hope for understanding and acceptance, Ellie would help him with their parents. Then he would go back to New York and live an honest life. A life with Marshall.

He was thinking about the right words to use, when a deer appeared out of nowhere. He wrenched the steering wheel to avoid hitting it. The black Camaro flipped across the median and into the path of a tractor-trailer. Kit's last thought was of Marshall.

Chapter One

Look at her. She sleeps like she did when she was a little girl, curved on her side, one arm supporting her head the other hand clutching the satin blanket edging. Her bright red hair is shorter now, curls spread over the pillow. There's even a dog sleeping between her feet. Ellie always had a dog or a cat in bed with her. I used to come here a lot after I died, but Ellie never sensed my presence. Her son, CJ, saw me a couple of times. Kids and animals are more open to visitors from wherever I am. Speaking of dogs, this one lifts his head and whines, can't fool him. The dog eyes me and puts his head down. Let her sleep, dog, she's going to need her rest. Don't worry, fella. I love her as much as you do.

As she was about to take Hugh Jackman's pants off, the music blared in Ellie's ear. Hugh's sexy Australian rumble turned into the voice of Toby Keith wailing about whiskey girls. She hit the snooze button and tried to get back to Hugh's pants or more specifically the bulge. But it was not to be. Toby's song was replaced by the whining and snuffling coming from the foot of the bed. Sighing, she opened her eyes and sat up. "Okay, Sam, shut up." She picked up the phone and hit one on speed dial. After a couple of rings, a muffled voice answered.

"Not today," Patti croaked.

"Yes, today. I'll be there in ten to get you and don't forget Dee's leash. I don't want to chase her through the woods again." Ellie patted Sam who after more snuffling and yawning came over and lay next to her. Samson, the love of her life, her Bichon Frise.

"Not today," Patti repeated.

"We'll stop at Timmy's on the way home." Ellie's voice dropped to a whisper. "And I'll tell you about the sex dream I had with Hugh Jackman."

"You've got my attention, but I'll need a doughnut if you're going to get me out of bed."

"Deal. See you in a few." Ellie grabbed her favorite blue sweats and dressed in the dark, careful not to wake Charlie. Sam scampered down the stairs ahead of her and danced around her legs as she slipped on her sneakers.

The sun rose to light a foggy morning, typical spring weather for western New York. Ellie shivered as she opened the car door. Sam jumped in, whining, tail going. A minute later she pulled into Patti's driveway. Before she could toot the horn, the garage door slid up and Patti appeared with her dog Delilah, nicknamed Dee. Patti was only five one and Dee was a fawn-colored Great Dane. The top of Dee's head came to Patti's nose. Dee clambered into the backseat, forcing Sammy to a perch on the rear window. Dee snuffed at Ellie's face and licked her cheek as she settled into the back seat.

"Hugh Jackman?" Patti got in the car and fastened her seat belt. "Did you get it on?"

"No, but we danced and sang a couple of tunes. I got his shirt off, very sparkly." Ellie watched for deer running across the road. "I was working on his pants when the alarm went off."

"You never got past seeing him in *The Boy from Oz*."

"True, he's amazing, that chest, those arms." Ellie pulled into the parking lot behind the high school.

"Okay. Let's get this straight. It only counts as a sex dream if you actually have sex." Patti led Dee out of the car.

"Well, I wanted to. I hate when those dreams get interrupted." Ellie snagged a wiggling Sam and got his leash on. He hopped out of the car and started jumping up in a vain attempt to sniff Dee's butt. "Sammy, give it up. Dee's not interested." Ellie tugged him away.

They made their way over to the track and started walking. Once around to warm up, eight power walking, one to cool down. The dogs kept up easily, knowing they would have a chance to sniff around when their owners completed their exercise. Patti lit a cigarette as they finished their circuit. She inhaled deeply and exhaled with a sigh. "That's better."

"No, it's not," Ellie said.

"My only reason for doing this." Patti took another deep drag. "I'm down to two a day."

"Two too many."

They led the dogs over to the edge of the woods and strolled along, letting the animals sniff and investigate. Ellie shivered a little in the cool, damp morning air. "Is it ever going to get warm?"

Patti stubbed out her cigarette then picked up the butt and put it in a little plastic bag. "You're expecting spring? In Buffalo?" She laughed. "C'mon, Ellie, you know the drill, seven months of crappy weather, two months of semi-crappy weather and three months of summer with a lot of humidity." She tugged on Dee's leash. "We have another month of semi-crappy before summer. Let's go, I want my payoff." They stopped at Tim Horton's getting coffee, doughnuts for Patti and the dogs, and muffins to take home.

"Best coffee in the world." Patti took an appreciative sip. The dogs scarfed their treats and eyed the muffins. "That's it, you two," Patti said. A few minutes later they pulled in her driveway. Patti got out. After opening the back door for Dee, she stuck her head in the car. "Call me if you want to do something later."

"Okay, but I have a mountain of laundry, so I'll probably tackle that."

"Whatever. Thanks for rousting my tired old butt."

"No problem." She watched Patti and Dee go into the house. Patti's butt looked pretty good. Her wonderful olive skin didn't burn or wrinkle, making her seem all of twenty-eight. Her dark brown eyes were framed with naturally long lashes. Her hair was glossy dark brown worn in a sleek bob that skimmed her shoulders. She still wore a perfectly proportioned size four. Men loved her, especially her husband, Joe. Ellie

sighed and backed out of the driveway. Ellie and Patti had been friends since second grade. Patti had always been adored, by her parents, her brothers, everybody including Ellie.

* * *

As she came in through the laundry room, CJ stood in the kitchen drinking from the orange juice carton. He spotted her and put the carton down. "Sorry, Mom."

"Gross." She handed him a glass. Sammy capered at his feet. Ellie held out the box of muffins. "Banana nut and blueberry."

"Thanks." He opened the box and ate a muffin in two bites. Sammy snatched up the crumbs that fell to the floor. "Good job, Sam," CJ mumbled.

Ellie sipped her coffee and regarded her son. Seventeen and six feet four, he loomed over her. The spitting image of her brother, from his build to his red hair and cornflower blue eyes, he even walked like Kit, long strides, always in a hurry.

"Mom, I need the car tonight." CJ startled her out of her reverie.

"Yes, I know." She gestured to the calendar hanging on the refrigerator. "It's marked."

"So you'll be home in time?"

"Definitely." She looked at the clock. "Better get moving."

"Josh is picking me up. Lots of time." He poured a tall glass of juice and took another muffin. "If I had my own ride, things would be a lot easier."

Ellie shook her head at the familiar words. "Be glad you can drive my car."

"Mooom." He rolled his eyes.

"Can it." Ellie filled Sammy's dishes with food and water and headed for the stairs. "Leave a muffin for your father."

Charlie was still sleeping. Ellie shut the bathroom door so she wouldn't disturb him. After showering, she dried herself and wiped the steam from the mirror. She applied moisturizer and toweled her red curls. She studied herself in the mirror. Not bad for thirty-eight. Her breasts were still high and firm, mostly because they weren't big. She was long-waisted and slim-hipped, although her butt was too big. Her legs were long and muscular from years of running. Her best feature was her bright green eyes. She was about to start dressing when Charlie came into their bathroom. He was rumpled and sleepy, but his eyes opened wide when he saw his wife. He stood behind her and cupped her breasts.

"Nice," he mumbled. "I was hoping to catch you when you were still sweaty and nasty." His hands moved to her stomach, tickling, teasing as they moved lower. He nuzzled her neck and gently nipped at a particularly sensitive spot.

Ellie leaned back into her husband. His bare chest felt good against her back. She closed her eyes and moaned softly as his hands stroked between her legs. She reached into his pajama bottoms and circled his erection. "Is this for me?"

"They're all for you, baby," he whispered. "Let me show you." Charlie dropped his bottoms and led her back to bed.

* * *

Ellie applied mascara to her invisible red lashes and dressed for work while Charlie showered. She reached in and slapped his firm butt. "Thanks a lot, sailor, you were great."

Charlie laughed. "You're going?"

"Yeah, I'm late but it was worth it. I got you a muffin."

"Good, can you drop my suits off at the cleaners?"

"Which ones?"

"On the chair."

She found the suits and another one on the floor. "Got em."

"I'm on my last pair of gym socks," he yelled. "And we're out of skim milk."

"I'm doing laundry tonight and I'll pick up milk later." She stuck her head in the bathroom door. "Are you coming home for dinner?"

The shower turned off and Charlie stepped out. "I'll be late, have to meet a new client and I'm starting a trial tomorrow."

"Okay." She headed for the door.

On the drive to work, she remembered what day it was. "Happy Birthday, Kit," she whispered. "Wish I could bake you a cake." She rifled around and jammed a Sarah Vaughan CD in the player, punching the buttons till she got to "Someone to Watch Over Me". The rich contralto filled the car's interior and Ellie smiled. "You can always rely on Sarah. Right, Kit?"

Chapter Two

You can always rely on Sarah or Billie or Etta or BB. You can always count on Ellie too. When you need something done, Ellie is your girl. Pick up the dog, drive to the dentist, groceries, drugstore, hockey games, hockey practice and church on Sundays. I depended on her too. She hauled my drunken ass into the house when I was the high school football hero. She would leave her window unlocked and sneak me in. Her scrawny body supported me as we weaved to the bathroom. She held on to me when I was sick. She washed my face, cleaned up after me, our parents never knew. It was our secret. She made my lunch every morning, came to every football game I played. From the time she was twelve she did all my Christmas shopping.

When I died and Mom and Dad fell apart, Ellie took care of them. I was the favorite. Ellie lived in my shadow. Too bad I had to die to realize what an amazing woman my baby sister is.

Ellie stared at the document on her computer screen, trying to make sense of the technical jargon written by the programmer. She was scrolling back to the first page, when the phone rang.

"Ellie Newman," she spoke into the receiver.

"It's me," Patti said. "I just saw these gorgeous earrings on TV. They'd be great on you."

"How much?" Ellie started to read again.

"I'll call Charlie. He can get them for you for Mother's Day."

"Sounds good." Ellie looked at the computer screen. "Back to work."

"Okay, the other reason I called, today is Kit's birthday, isn't it?"

"Yeah. He would have been forty-four."

"Seems like yesterday when he died."

"It's twelve years, Patti." Ellie's voice hitched a little.

"You okay? Want to go to lunch?"

"Can't. I was late coming in this morning."

"Late, you're never late. Was the traffic bad?"

"No." Ellie's voice dropped to a whisper. "Charlie got amorous this morning."

"No way!" Patti started to laugh. "You two act like teenagers."

"Not quite, but we still have a lot of fun together," Ellie said smugly.

"Remember when your mother caught you guys doing it on her washer?"

"Oh God, poor Mom. She made me clean the outside of the washer with bleach." Ellie giggled. "When Kit found out, he never let us forget it. He got us a washer and dryer for a wedding present."

"Delivering them to the honeymoon suite was a nice touch."

"Yeah, after he and his buddies took the bed out, Charlie was furious." Ellie felt herself tearing up. "Seems like yesterday."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. I just miss him is all, but I'll play some Charlie Parker in his memory tonight and slug back a Molson's."

"Sounds like a plan. Want some company?"

"Sure, you can bring the Molson's."

"Deal."

* * *

Ellie was leaving the drycleaners when the girl behind the counter ran out the door waving an envelope. "This was in your husband's suit pocket, Mrs. Newman."

"Thanks. I forgot to check all the pockets," Ellie said.

Ellie took the envelope and crammed it in her purse. She got back in the car and started for home. Suddenly a deer leapt out of the brush along the side of the road. Ellie slammed on the brakes as the deer nimbly ran in front of her car. Everything on the front seat shot to the floor. Her purse tipped over, spilling the contents everywhere. She pulled off to calm down and started to shove things back in her purse. When she grabbed the envelope from Charlie's suit, it opened and a wad of bills came out.

"What in the world?" The money was folded once and rubber-banded. She turned it over in her hands. One of his clients must have paid him in cash. She noticed a pink business card. There was a single name in gold script "Randee, Pussycat Escorts". A phone number was listed at the bottom.

When had Charlie started representing hookers?

She turned the card over. *8:30, Adams Mark, cocktails, May 5* was scrawled in Charlie's loopy script. Ellie's hands were trembling. She counted out the bills. Fifteen, all hundreds. Today was May fifth. This was really strange, but sometimes clients paid in cash. But why the trashy business card? And why meet this person for drinks and in a hotel? If she didn't know better it would look like Charlie had misplaced his hooker money.

* * *

Ellie was in her kitchen surrounded by piles of neatly folded clean laundry. Patti walked in with the last basket of towels. She sat down at the table and pulled one out. As soon as CJ took off, Ellie had called Patti.

"I just can't believe Charlie would see a hooker," Patti said. "It's totally out of character. That money is probably a retainer."

"It's not a retainer." Ellie folded a pair of socks. "He would have called looking for it. Besides who meets a client in a hotel bar at eight-thirty at night? There must be another explanation."

"My God, I just remembered my cousin Carmella." Patti dropped the towel and grabbed her cell.

"What about her?"

"Not her. Her daughter Angie works at the Adams Mark. She's a bartender." Patti pressed buttons. A minute later she motioned for a pen and paper. "Okay, got it. Thanks, Carm." She broke the connection and dialed the number she'd just scribbled down. "Angie's working tonight."

"Wait, what are you doing?" Ellie took the phone away.

"I'm calling Angie to see if she knows this Randee person." Patti grabbed it back. "Maybe she can tell us if Charlie's there." She pressed the number again and stopped when she saw tears running down Ellie's face. "You do want to know, don't you?"

"I'm not sure." Ellie grabbed a tissue. "I trust him, Patti. We've been together since I was seventeen. I can't believe he would do anything like this." She looked at the wad of cash lying on the table. It made no sense. There had to be an explanation other than the obvious one. She breathed deeply. "Call Angie. Once we find out this is nothing, I can relax."

Patti nodded and dialed. Ellie stood and took a basket of clean clothes upstairs. She put the laundry away slowly, taking care to stack things neatly in the dressers. *Charlie loves me*. Marrying young, they had always been a team. After graduating from college, she had worked and taken care of CJ while Charlie went to law school. They had a common goal. A good life for their son and for the two of them. He had been there for her when Kit died and when her parents passed too.

She sat on the bed and stared at the framed photo from their wedding. Charlie had his arms wrapped around her, looking as if he would never let her go. They were laughing, full of joy.

Could he cheat on her? No way, he loved her. They had a deep connection. They finished each other's sentences. Sure he was gone a lot of evenings, but lawyers had to make a living. She had grown used to being alone at night. Nagging and complaining weren't her style. She understood when he went hunting with his friends or spent hours at the gym. He needed to relieve the stress in his life. The mass of papers and

receipts on the top of his dresser beckoned her. Should she go through them, look for a clue? No, she wouldn't. There was no reason to spy on him. Charlie wouldn't cheat. She was about to take the empty laundry basket downstairs when Patti came into the room. She looked a little pale.

"So?" Ellie asked.

Patti flopped on the bed. "I talked to Angie for a minute. She'll call me back when she gets a break." She picked at the comforter. "Apparently Randee's a regular. She's meets her clients there. Very discreet, exclusive clientele. "

"Charlie may be her lawyer."

"I described Charlie to Angie." Patti stopped and looked at Ellie. "He was with her when I called. He and Randee have a pattern, once a week, a different day each week. They have a drink in the bar, disappear for an hour or so, then Randee comes back and sees another client." Patti put her arm around Ellie. "This isn't recent, El. Angie says it's been going on for at least six months, maybe longer."

Ellie found it difficult to breathe. "There must be reasonable explanation for this. What does she look like?"

Patti shrugged her shoulders. "Angie wasn't real specific—blonde, big tits, trashy looking."

"Charlie always did go for the obvious." Ellie picked up her dog and cuddled him, letting her tears wet his fur. "But there's no reason for him to fool around. We're happy, our sex life is great. Why would he have an affair?"

"It's not an affair, he's paying for it. No emotional investment," Patti said. "It's probably not a threat to your marriage."

"I don't believe it. He's too good a man to do this." She pulled the wad of cash out of her pocket.

"I just thought of something else." Patti pointed to the money. "If you have that he must have other hooker money stashed. He could be emptying your savings."

"I would have noticed. I was wrong. This must be a retainer."

"Want me to have Joe talk to him?" Patti asked.

"Not a good idea." Ellie shook her head. Joe ran his own construction company. He was a bear of a man, totally in love with his wife and family. He would do anything Patti asked of him, including taking care of Charlie with a backhoe. "I don't know what I want to do. I have to think."

The front door slammed and CJ's voice rang out. "Mom, I'm home. Where are you?" His footsteps clomped up the stairs.

Ellie wiped her streaming eyes. "In here, honey."

"Mom, you should have seen me! Coach Roberts changed us all around. I'm still goalie." CJ burst into the room with Patti's son, Josh, on his heels. "Hi, Aunt Patti."

"Hey, Mom." Josh crossed the room and kissed his mother on the cheek. Josh was tall like his dad with his mother's dark brown eyes. He wore his black curly hair short and recently had his ear pierced, much to his father's annoyance. He dropped a kiss on Ellie's cheek. "Hi, Aunt Ellie."

"Hi, gorgeous," Ellie said. Josh had a charm and maturity far beyond his seventeen years.

"Mom, we rocked. With Josh as forward we'll kick butt against the Rangers. We just have to..." CJ stopped when he got a good look at Ellie's face. "What's wrong? Your eyes are red."

"Just a little blue, honey." Ellie choked back a sob. How would she stop crying?

"Uncle Kit's birthday today," Patti said quickly. "Those walks down memory lane make you cry sometimes."

"Shit, Mom...I mean shoot. I totally forgot." CJ placed an awkward arm around his mother. "I'm sorry." He looked at the floor. "I wish I remembered him better."

"It's okay, honey. You were only five when he died." She kissed his cheek. "He was crazy about you."

"Yeah, I remember going to the beach with him."

"He taught you to swim when you were only two." Ellie's eyes welled up again.

"Okay, guys. Give us a minute." Patti shooed the boys out of the room. "There's some big cookies on the table. We'll be down in five." She closed the door and turned to Ellie. "I can have Joe deal with this."

"No, because there is nothing to deal with." Ellie blew her nose.

Patti's cell phone chirped. "Probably Angie." She spoke for a minute into the phone and hung up.

"The bimbo and Charlie just left the bar. Angie followed them. They took the elevator up to the rooms." Patti dropped her phone back in her pocket. "You want to go storm the place? Catch him with his pants down? Angie can get us his room number."

Ellie shuddered. Go there? Confront him? No way. She hated confrontations and would do almost anything to avoid them. She wished she hadn't said anything to Patti. Better to keep quiet, not tell anyone and ignore it.

"What would I say? Hi, honey, that's a client right? Do you want dinner when you come home?" Ellie stopped. "It may be somebody who looks like Charlie."

Patti gripped Ellie by her shoulders. "Sweetie, you can't just hold this inside. It'll eat away at you."

"I'll talk to him when he gets home."

"No, you won't. You'll get all quiet and sad, eat two large pizzas and just put up with it."

"I don't want my marriage to be in trouble."

"It may not be, but it would be better to know." Patti crossed her arms.

"What would you do? If it were Joe?" Ellie searched her friend's face.

"He wouldn't know what hit him," Patti said in a low voice. "I'd go to the hotel with a couple of my brothers. And our mothers." She smiled.

Ellie laughed. "Let's keep my mother-in-law out of this for the time being." She stood up. "You're right. If I think too much, I'll never do anything."

"I'm with you one hundred percent." They ran down the stairs. Ellie told CJ that she would be out for a while and to lock up as she had her keys.

They made it to the hotel in ten minutes, mostly because Patti drove. Three of her brothers were cops, so speed limits were merely a suggestion as far as she was concerned. Patti met Angie in the lobby and steered Ellie toward the elevators.

"They're in room 912," Patti whispered. The elevator doors closed as Patti pressed nine.

"Oh my God, what am I doing here?" Ellie choked. "I'm going to be sick."

"You want to leave? We could find a ladies room and come back."

The blood rushed around in her head. Her heart beat fast and her mouth was completely dry. She grasped a clammy hand around Patti's wrist. "I have to know. And when it turns out to be nothing, I'm going to kill you."

"Okay. Just follow me," Patti said as the elevator doors opened.

"How are we getting in?" Ellie asked.

"With the passkey." Patti held out a card. "We have to return it."

"We can't break in."

"Well they aren't opening the door for us," Patti pointed out. "Now come on."

They walked down the long corridor toward room 912. They were about halfway there when the door opened and Charlie stepped into the hall. He looked rumpled and his jacket was slung over his arm. As he turned toward them, a long white arm appeared and drew him back in the room. The sound of kissing and laughing came through loud and clear.

Ellie and Patti froze. Ellie blinked several times. She wanted to flee in the opposite direction or have the earth swallow her up. Her husband, her Charlie, was kissing another woman and from the sounds they made, he was enjoying the hell out of it. Suddenly Ellie heard shouting. She was at the door to the room before she realized the voice she heard was her own. She didn't remember running. Patti was hot on her heels, trying to grab her arm. Ellie shoved Charlie into the room. She pushed him so hard he was knocked to the floor on top of his bleached blonde hooker. Ellie felt the room spin, heard a loud buzzing in her ears and threw up all over them.

* * *

"Drink this." Patti shoved a large snifter of brandy under Ellie's nose. They were in the darkest corner of the hotel bar seated in a booth. Patti sat and took Ellie's hand. "C'mon. It'll settle your stomach."

Ellie took a small taste. It burned going down and for a moment she thought it would come up. Then it settled and warmth spread through her body. She took another sip. "Did you give Angie the passkey?"

"All done." Patti slipped her shoes off and curled up in the booth. "That was amazing, quite a battle cry."

"Don't remind me." Ellie shook her head. "I don't know what came over me."

"Well, it was just great. Charlie looked like a hooked fish." Patti toyed with her drink. "I wonder if he cleaned the puke out of his ears yet."

Ellie and Patti beat a hasty retreat after surveying Charlie trying to get off the hooker. Randee wasn't much to look at once you got past the huge torpedo-shaped boobs and the long legs. She was a little on the fat side, her face was round and her nose had a bump in it. It had been difficult to see much else given Charlie had been on top of her, and the coating of puke of course.

"I bet he's furious." Ellie finished the last of her brandy and signaled Angie for another. "He hates scenes." Ellie grabbed another tissue. "It was really him, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was." Patti nodded sadly. "What a jerk."

"This is just like when Kit died," Ellie said softly.

"How?"

"I didn't really believe Kit was dead until we saw his body at the funeral home. I couldn't believe Charlie would be unfaithful until I saw it."

"I'm so sorry, honey." Patti looked at the second brandy the waitress set in front of Ellie. "Are we getting drunk?"

"Yes, I think so." Ellie picked up her brandy. "I'm entitled."

"Okay, then." Patti slugged back the rest of hers. "I'll call home and book us a room." She pulled her cell phone out.

"We can't stay out all night," Ellie said in a shocked voice.

"Sure we can, Joe can get the kids off. You call CJ and let him know you're okay. He can take care of Sammy in the morning."

"I'll call in sick to work. And in the morning we'll get the spa treatment." Ellie warmed to the idea and pulled her credit card out of her purse. "Charlie's treat."

"You're on." Patti laughed.

Chapter Three

Do you have any idea how much effort it took to make that deer run across the road? Talk about split-second timing. Ellie has excellent reflexes. Tough as it is for her, she had to find out Charlie's secret. Everyone has secrets, of course, but in a city the size of Buffalo, Charlie's secret wasn't much of one. Better for Ellie to find out this way, than hear it somewhere else. And she would have, and it would hurt more.

Charlie's not a bad guy, but he's afflicted with a restless pecker. Pretty common I know. I wasn't exactly faithful either. Even when I found my soul mate, I couldn't keep my pants zipped. More about that later. Ellie can do a lot better for herself. With Charlie or without him, my baby sister deserves a whole lot more than she's had.

"Carafe of coffee, dry toast and a bottle of Advil." Patti's voice was a croak. "Oh yeah, and some seltzer water."

Ellie cracked open an eye. "Tea."

"Pot of tea." Patti put the phone down.

"What time is it?" Ellie squinted and lifted her head, then put it down when the room started to spin. "I think I'm still drunk."

"Most likely. I've never seen you drink so much." Patti stood and swayed a little. "Geez, I'm too old for this."

"I don't remember much from last night. I didn't do anything stupid, did I?"

"Nothing that would get in the newspaper," Patti replied as she headed to the bathroom. "Except for buying everyone in the bar a round

and asking every man in the place if he would do you, you were pretty low key."

"My God, every man in the bar?" Ellie buried her face in the pillow. She recalled handing her credit card to Angie and telling her the next round was on her. The DJ was tipped to play "I Will Survive" several times in a row. There were a lot of men in the bar, some kind of sales meeting. Ellie got out of bed and groaned her way to the bathroom. Patti was in the shower. Ellie sat on the toilet and held her throbbing head. "What else did I do?"

Patti peeked around the shower curtain, her head a mass of bubbles. "You handed out Charlie's business cards, and told everybody he was an excellent attorney and an expert in being sly, deceitful and lowdown." She disappeared.

Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. "That's not so bad." She looked at her rumpled clothes. "I don't like sleeping in my clothes."

The shower shut off and Ellie handed Patti a towel and got out of the bathroom. She sat on the edge of the bed and took deep breaths, hoping her head would clear. She finally looked at the bedside clock. It was past ten. Patti emerged from the bathroom wrapped in a towel. "Bathroom's all yours."

"I don't remember how I got here."

"Joe carried you." Patti toweled her hair.

"Joe was here?"

"He came down to see if we were okay and to bring us clean underwear." She gestured to the overnight bag on the dresser.

"I don't remember him."

"You were on the dance floor." Patti rummaged in the bag.

"Oh, did I make a spectacle of myself?"

"Well, maybe a little one," Patti said carefully.

"My God, what did I do?"

"You kind of collapsed, sobbing on the dance floor." Patti sat next to her on the bed. "You were wailing about Charlie. Then you hiccupped and passed out. Joe carried you up here."

Ellie grabbed a pillow. "I'm never leaving this room."

"Sure you are. You have to figure out what you're going to do about your marriage. And you better call your office." There was a knock on the door. "Coffee, thank God." Patti ran into the bathroom. "Let the guy in, Ellie. I'll get dressed."

After a shower, Advil and a lot of water, Ellie felt a little better. She wasn't ready to face Charlie yet.

An hour later Patti pulled into Ellie's driveway "Okay, his car is gone. What are you doing today?"

"I'm toying with the idea of throwing all his stuff on the front lawn and changing the locks," Ellie said.

"Need some help?"

Ellie shook her head. "No, I have to call my gynecologist. I need to be tested."

"You think Charlie would be that stupid?"

"He always hated wearing condoms. After CJ was born and we found out I couldn't have more kids, he never had to use them. I can't imagine he would now."

"Let's burn his stuff."

"Maybe later." Ellie leaned over and hugged her friend. "Thanks, for everything."

"Anytime. You better get in the house. I can hear Sammy bashing himself against the door." Patti kissed Ellie's cheek. "Call me later."

* * *

"I want to kill him." Ellie sat at Patti's kitchen table drinking coffee late that afternoon. "God, it was so humiliating. I feel like I've done something wrong. I almost got a safe sex lecture."

"Are you okay? Did the doctor find anything?"

"No, not so far. The blood test results will be ready in a couple of days."

Patti put a big plate of brownies on the table. "Eat."

"Not hungry."

"Who says you have to be hungry to eat a brownie?" She pushed the plate toward Ellie. "Have one now before the kids get home."

Ellie took one and bit into it. The overwhelming taste of chocolate filled her senses and she closed her eyes. "Heaven," she mumbled. "Thanks."

"No problem." Patti sipped her coffee. "You playing hooky from work tomorrow?"

"No. If I did, Bill would worry. He's a great boss, but if I'm gone for more than a day, he'll think I've got a terminal disease. I never take sick time." Ellie finished her treat. "I wish I could go away."

"You mean like on a vacation?"

"No, not exactly. Just maybe live someplace different for a while." Ellie tried to finish her half-formed thought. "Take a step back, regroup."

"Run away?"

"Yes, I guess. Not that I could. It would be very selfish." Ellie swiped at the crumbs.

"And Charlie's the only one allowed to be selfish in your marriage, right?" Patti said pointedly.

"It's not just Charlie. There's CJ, my job, the choir and the house."

Patti sat forward in her chair. "Put all that aside for a minute and let's fantasize. Where would you go if you could?"

"That's easy. I'd go to New York." Ellie smiled. "Everything a person could want is there. Remember when we went last year? God it was great. I never wanted to come home." Ellie's shoulders slumped. "It's just a fantasy."

"You want to be by yourself?"

"Yeah, that would be different. I've never lived alone." Ellie stared out the window. "But it's more than that. I want to live another life, not this one. Go someplace where nobody knows me."

"Can't do that here. Everybody knows everybody in this town."

"No kidding." She wrapped her arms around herself. "Although Charlie has managed to hide his cheating."

Patti shook her head. "We caught him. Joe mentioned he heard some rumors."

"What?" Ellie sat straight up in her chair. "What did he hear?"

"Nothing specific, some guys talking about Charlie at the gym is all."

"What did they say?"

"Just that he liked to have a good time while his little wife stayed at home." Patti stared at the floor. "Then there was some whispering and a lot of laughing."

Ellie grimaced. "I love the admiration other men must feel for him."

"If it makes you feel any better, I let Joe have it for not telling me sooner." Patti poured them more coffee. "Have you heard from Charlie?"

"There was a note on the kitchen table," Ellie said. "And a bunch of messages on the answering machine. Some on my voice mail at work too. I deleted them all."

"You'll have to face him sooner or later." Patti nibbled the edge of a brownie. "Unless you want to move in here."

"Thanks. You're right though, I should go home." But she continued to sit there. "You know what? I don't have a life, that's the problem. I'm boring, a drudge. I've become a wallet and a set of car keys to CJ. I'm invisible."

"He's selfish like all teenagers. He loves you. I love you too, honey."

Ellie nodded. "I love you too." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Patti pointed to Sammy who lay on Ellie's feet. "You're the center of his world. So if you do decide to run away, you better take him."

"As if I could ever leave him." Ellie scratched Sammy's ears. He whined and his tail waved back and forth.

* * *

Ellie went home and made CJ his favorite dinner—spaghetti with fresh marinara and Italian sausage. They ate in the kitchen. Ellie picked at her food with little appetite. CJ ate with the gargantuan hunger of a teenage boy. He was so intent on his meal he didn't notice Ellie pushing the food around her plate. When he finished, he carried his dishes to the sink and ran out the door.

"Shooting baskets with Josh. Dinner was great."

Ellie was cleaning up the kitchen when Charlie walked in. She closed the dishwasher and stared at him. He looked exhausted as he leaned against the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Ellie asked. "Was your skank busy tonight?"

Charlie closed his eyes and sighed. "Ellie, please, I don't want CJ to hear us."

"He's at Josh's." Ellie bit the words off. She picked up a dishcloth and started to scrub at an imaginary spot. Sammy capered at Charlie's feet.

"Hey, Sam. How's the boy?" Charlie crouched on the floor and scratched the little dog. "Where did you go last night?" He looked up at Ellie.

"You mean after I vomited on you and your hooker?" Ellie dropped the dishcloth in the sink and faced Charlie. "Patti and I went out for a few drinks. Then I picked up a stranger and fucked his brains out!"

Ellie burst into tears and ran up the stairs to their bedroom. She yanked out one of Charlie's dresser drawers and pushed past Charlie to the guest room and dumped the contents in the middle of the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Moving your crap into the guest room." She shoved the empty drawer back into place and reached for another. Charlie put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around.

"You're overreacting. Calm down." His voice was getting louder.

"Overreacting? I find you in a hotel room with your tongue down a hooker's throat and I'm overreacting?" Ellie wrenched herself out of Charlie's grasp. She yanked out another drawer. Charlie pulled it away from her and shoved it back in the dresser.

"I'll move what I need," he said.

Ellie sat on the edge of the bed. She grabbed a tissue and pulled Sammy into her lap. "Good. Now get away from me."

"Ellie, please, listen to me for a minute." Charlie dropped to his knees. "I'm sorry, it was a mistake. I don't know what came over me."

"The same thing that's come over you for months apparently." She pulled out the tattered business card from her nightstand. "Here, you lost this."

He grabbed the card and crushed it. "So that's how you found out." He took Ellie's hand. "I understand you're upset and angry. But it doesn't mean anything."

Ellie shoved him away and stood up. "You understand nothing. Do you know what my life is like? That I spend my evenings waiting for you to come home and I find out you're paying for a hooker." Ellie stopped. "You disgust me. Do you have any idea how humiliating it was for me to go to my doctor and ask for an HIV test?"

"That's ridiculous. There's no way that you could have HIV." Charlie stared at the floor.

"Why? Did you use condoms? Because I know you hate condoms."

Charlie wouldn't look her in the eye. "Yeah."

"All the time?" Ellie pressed. "Because the doctor thinks I may have Chlamydia." Ellie was amazed at her sudden ability to lie.

"What's that?"

"Chlamydia is an STD. You better alert the skank," Ellie said. "You need to get checked. Sometimes people don't get symptoms."

"Symptoms?" His right hand was moving to his crotch as his left hand raked through his hair.

"Painful urination, burning, itching, smelly discharge." Ellie ticked off the symptoms. "And if you have it the doctor has to report it to the health department."

Charlie's face went white. He was a major hypochondriac. Ellie knew he would spend the rest of the night digging at his crotch. Served him right.

"Charlie, I want you to get out of our room and leave me alone. The sight of you is making me sick."

"Ellie, I love you. I've always loved you." He tried to put his arms around her. "Please, honey."

She pulled away. "Not now, it hurts too much."

"Okay, okay." Charlie held up his hands and walked out of the room. "I love you so much."

Ellie climbed into the bed and curled up into a ball. Charlie had always comforted her when things were bad. He'd held her up through Kit's death and then her parents' deaths. They were soul mates, best friends. She could talk about anything with Charlie. He was funny and sweet and all hers. Had been all hers. She grabbed a tissue and wiped her eyes. She cuddled Sammy closer. "I'll cry on you, Sammy."

Chapter Four

Oh, man. This is tearing my heart out. I wish she could cry on me or I could kick the crap out of my brother-in-law. But all I can do is hover around and watch. Very frustrating being on the astral plane or wherever I am.

The lie about the STD was pretty good. Good for you, Ellie. Make him suffer.

It takes a lot to get Ellie angry. But when she finally gets there, look out. And she's there, definitely. Fidelity and trust mean everything to her.

They meant everything to my soul mate too. I'll never understand why he put up with so much crap from me. Unconditional love, another thing I didn't understand until I died.

Marshall rolled over and found himself smushed against another body. What the hell? He opened his eyes, observed the sleeping form next to him and remembered the damn cast party. The redhead had been eyeing him for months, touching his shoulder, cupping his arm. And last night Marshall had been weak, vulnerable. He managed to stick to Diet Coke at the party, but when the redhead had asked to share a cab, Marshall lost all good sense and invited him in for coffee.

Coffee was the last thing on their minds as they rode the elevator to Marshall's apartment. And now he was stuck. He tried to remember the kid's name. Jamie? Jimmy? Johnny? The kid was in the chorus and understudied his role. Marshall looked him over in the morning light. Milky white skin dusted with freckles, red hair on his broad chest that turned darker as it moved down his flat stomach. A full soft mouth, red

lashes that covered blue eyes. Marshall sat up and got out of bed. He always reverted to men who resembled Kit when he was down. But there was only one Kit. He made his way to the kitchen to brew coffee.

Marshall was drinking his first cup when the redhead wandered into the kitchen, wearing nothing but a smile. He leaned down and kissed Marshall lightly. He tasted of mint. Had he used Marshall's toothbrush?

"Good morning." The redhead sat gracefully in the chair opposite Marshall, making sure to show off every detail of his body.

"Good morning to you." Marshall took another sip of coffee. "What's with the porn star pose?" Marshall stood, got a coffee cup down and filled it. "I know your body is great. You don't have to wave it under my nose, Jim.

"It's Jamie. My name is Jamie."

"Sorry, of course." Marshall handed Jamie a cup of coffee.

"Thanks. You like my body?"

"What's not to like?" Marshall replied. How was he going to get this guy out of here?

Jamie stood and put his hands on either side of Marshall, effectively trapping him against the counter. "So, let's go back to bed."

He was too close. Marshall found it hard to breathe. Marshall pushed against him hard, knocking Jamie off balance.

"Sorry, but I've got a full day." Marshall reached out to steady him. "I need to get going."

"I could stay here and wait for you to come home." Jamie ran his hand down Marshall's chest. "Keep the bed warm."

"I have a cat that does that."

"Jesus, you're brushing me off."

"Look, I like you but believe me you don't want to get involved."

"I thought we could talk about the work, you know, maybe give me a few pointers." He looked at Marshall. "I've admired you since I was a kid. I watched you on that show you were on."

Marshall suddenly saw a way out. "How about I give my agent a call for you? Norrine's always looking for talent. I'll bet she'd talk to you."

Jamie's face lit up. "Norrine Davenport? You think she'd represent me?"

Marshall held up his hands "I can't promise that, but I will get you in to see her."

"Thanks, man." Jamie hugged him and then scampered off to get dressed.

When the door slammed, Marshall breathed a sigh of relief. He got a can of cat food out of the cupboard, forked it into her bowl and warmed it in the microwave. "It's okay, come on out." He placed the food on the floor. A minute later, Sheba sauntered into the kitchen, sat in front of her dish and glared at him.

"Uh-uh, you have to eat this. The vet said the other stuff makes you throw up." Marshall glared back.

The cat flipped her tail at him and stalked off. Marshall sighed, dumped the cat food in the garbage and opened a can of albacore tuna. He mixed it with a little cream. Sheba came back into the kitchen and twined around his ankles, purring loudly. The cat stuck her face in the dish. Cleaning up after her wasn't so bad. He picked up his phone and dialed Norrine. He hoped she was in a good mood.

"Amazing, this guy knew I was your agent." Norrine's tone was smooth as silk.

"You're a famous agent. All I had to do was say your first name and he knew."

"He set you up."

"Maybe." Marshall rubbed his eyes. "Call him anyway."

"Okay, only for you, sweetie." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "You used condoms?"

"Yeah, lots of them."

"You seeing him again?"

"I doubt it. I'm leaving for California in a couple of weeks," Marshall said. "I've got to find a cat sitter and some one to watch the apartment."

"What about Seth?" Norrine asked. Marshall's friend and sometime roommate Seth was a musician and songwriter. In other words, he only paid rent sporadically.

"He got a gig with Maizie Triumph. She's touring Europe. He left two days ago."

"Well, I would take Sheba if I could," Norrine replied. "These damn allergies of mine are brutal."

"I'll figure it out." Marshall paused. "You think this show is worth doing?"

"Fox wants it for January. You've got chemistry with the little anorexic dolly. It'll be great. Stop worrying."

"I've never played a dad before. When did I get too old for romantic leads?"

"Not too old, sweetie, too gay." Norrine laughed. "If you wanted the straight male roles, you should have stayed in the closet."

"I'm good at playing straight. I did it for four years on *Annie's Place*. Lucy and I were hot together."

"You were, but then you came out in *The Advocate*, the series ended and you got bupkus. People have a hard time separating the actor from the role." Norrine sighed. "You can get away with being a gay leading man in New York because most of you are. Television is different. It reaches middle America."

"I'm an actor. My personal life is irrelevant."

"Yes, so when you get interviewed, stay away from personal questions. Keep politics out of it and for God's sakes just talk about the show and how happy you are to be returning to television."

"In other words, lie."

"Exactly, sweetie. Now give me the little fairy's phone number and I'll get you off the hook."

"Thanks, Norrine."

Marshall spent part of the afternoon at the gym. After picking up groceries and the papers, he returned home.

The late afternoon light shone through the windows in his living room. His apartment on Central Park West was much too big for one person, but it belonged to him and he loved it. The apartment had been left to him by his paternal grandmother along with enough money to maintain it.

He opened the blinds and sat at the baby grand. He played scales to warm up then started doing riffs, fiddling around with melodies, losing himself in music. Sheba watched from her perch on the windowsill. He got so wrapped up he missed the phone ringing. The answering machine clicked on.

“Marsh? It’s Patti. If you’re there, could you pick up please?”

He rushed over. Patti was his favorite cousin. They were close friends too.

“Patti, sorry I didn’t hear the phone. Is it Mom?”

“No, your mom is fine. I thought you might be in California.”

“I leave in a couple of weeks.” He picked up Sheba and settled her in his lap. “What’s up?”

“That’s why I called. I was wondering about your apartment. Will it be empty?” Patti’s voice dropped. “I might know someone who’s looking for a place for the summer.”

“I’m not looking to sublet. Too much trouble. Besides, who wants to be in New York in the summer?”

“This person is having a tough time. She needs to get away, reassess and figure out some stuff.”

“You can come anytime you want.” He chuckled. “What did Joe do?”

“It’s not me, Marsh. It’s my friend, Ellie.”

Marshall gripped the phone tighter.

“Kit’s little sister,” Patti said. “She’s having some problems.”

“Is she sick?” Marshall asked. Kit had called her Ellie-Belly.

“No, her husband is the problem. You won’t believe what he did.”

A half hour later Marshall put the phone down. "Well, Sheba, how would you feel about sharing your space with a little white dog?"

Chapter Five

That's right, I did call her Ellie-Belly. Funny what people remember. Ellie was kind of chubby as a kid. She had a round stomach that was very ticklish. I used to carry her around upside down and tickle her. She would squeal and giggle and try to get away. Then when she was about ten, she discovered the joy of running and slimmed down. I still called her Ellie-Belly though, just to make her laugh. Poor kid isn't laughing much these days.

"I can't stand it anymore. It's like an armed camp. Charlie sleeps in the guest room. I can't even look at him. CJ tiptoes around afraid to make any noise." Ellie and Patti were on their third lap.

"Do you guys talk at all?" Patti asked.

"We yell. First it was my little fib about the STD. Then he wanted me to give him the hooker money back." She rolled her eyes. "The credit card bill came and he blew up again. Apparently drinks are expensive at hotel bars."

Patti laughed. "Too bad. If that's all it costs him, he's getting off cheaply."

"I want it all to end. I can't sleep, I can't eat and I think my skin is drying up."

"Maybe you should see a counselor."

"Charlie wants to see one." Ellie tugged on Sammy's leash. "I don't."

"Why not?"

"I'm too angry at him. Every time he leaves the house, I think he's meeting his hooker somewhere. I'm going through his stuff looking for

evidence he's cheating." Ellie walked faster. "I hate how this is making me act. When we do talk, I read something into every thing he says." Ellie pumped her arms. "I see hidden meanings in everything."

"Has Charlie told you anything about why he..." Patti's voice trailed off.

"No, he keeps telling me it was nothing." Ellie stopped in the middle of the track. "Patti, do you mind if I take off?" Ellie handed Sammy's leash to her.

"Go. Blow off some steam." Patti waved at her and took the dogs to the side of the track.

Twenty minutes later Ellie dropped to the ground beside Patti.

"Feel better?" Patti asked.

"Not really." Ellie rolled over on the grass. "You know, it's humiliating. Other people must know. I can't stand the thought of people feeling sorry for me. I'm afraid, I've given everything to him and CJ, and in a year my son will be in college. I've got to figure out what I want, what's out there for me." She stood. "Jesus, I sound like a promo for one of those horrible *Lifetime* movies."

"Never mind that. Are you divorcing him?"

"Maybe. I don't know. But I'm certainly not putting up with this anymore." She held out her hand and pulled Patti to her feet. "I wish I could disappear."

"Funny you should mention disappearing." Patti put her arm around Ellie. "I think I may have just the place."

"What are you talking about?"

"My cousin Marshall may be able to help." They made their way to the car.

"Marshall? Is he in a new play?" Ellie asked.

"New TV show. He's due in California in a couple of weeks."

"Good for him. He was great on *Annie's Place*. God, that man is so gorgeous."

"He'd be happy to hear you say that." Patti smiled. "His apartment is empty for the whole summer. He needs a cat sitter and he said you could stay at his place." Patti paused for a breath. "He also said you could bring Sammy."

"You're kidding, right?" Ellie was stunned.

"Nope, he has this amazing apartment. It's really big. At least three bedrooms, there's even a maid's room off the kitchen. Terrific light, even a patio, and it's all yours."

"Why would he do this? He hardly knows me."

"Because Marshall is a terrific guy, and he wants somebody nice to take care of Sheba," Patti said. "Remember when we were kids? He lived with Nonna."

"Sure, I had a little crush on him," Ellie said wistfully. "So did you."

"Yeah, and he gets better looking every year." Patti sighed. "Too bad he won't be passing those looks on to a new generation."

"Why is he so worried about his cat? Is it sick?"

"No, she's healthy but she's old, at least fourteen."

"And she's okay with dogs?"

"I guess. Marsh didn't think it would be a problem."

"Seems like a lot of trouble for a cat," Ellie observed.

"C'mon, pets are gay people's children." Patti laughed. "Marsh got her from an old boyfriend. He's nuts about her."

"What about the boyfriend?" Ellie asked.

"He died." Patti looked down and shook her head.

"That's awful."

"So, what do you think? He said if you're interested you should call him."

"Oh, I'm interested." Ellie nodded her head emphatically.

* * *

Ellie planned her escape carefully, methodically, keeping her anger and hurt tightly covered. She opened a new bank account, transferring money from their joint savings account. She stocked the freezer with CJ's favorite food and had Sammy groomed. She got CJ's things ready for camp and cleaned the house.

Her boss refused to accept her resignation. Instead he arranged for Ellie to take a leave. He even arranged for her to work part-time through email. Ellie readily agreed. The extra money would come in handy. There were only two things left for her to do before she could go. She had to tell CJ and Charlie.

The morning she was leaving she took CJ to breakfast. They sat in a booth at the local diner. CJ's legs stretched under the table and rested on the seat next to her. She looked down at his size thirteens and smiled.

"What?" CJ said around a mouthful of French toast.

"I remember when both your feet fit in the palm of my hand." Ellie pushed them on the floor. "C'mon. Sit up straight."

CJ rolled his eyes. "Mom, why did you drag me over here so early?" He gulped some orange juice. "I've got a chemistry quiz today."

"I'll get you to school on time." She glanced at her watch. "We have almost an hour." Ellie sipped her coffee and crumbled a piece of toast. "This isn't easy." She put the toast down. "I'm going away for the summer. In fact, I'm leaving today."

CJ stopped eating and looked at his mother. "Where are you going? You can't just go. What about me? And Dad? Does he know this?"

"Honey, listen to me for a minute." Ellie took CJ's hand. "It's just for the summer. And you're off to camp at the end of the month. You'll be gone all summer anyway."

CJ's shoulders slumped. "You and Dad are splitting up, aren't you? You guys fight all the time."

"We have some problems, yes. I don't know what will happen between me and your dad." She squeezed his hand. "I don't want you to worry about that."

"Mom, Josh told me Dad cheated on you." CJ's ears were red. "Is that true? Is that why you're leaving?"

"How would Josh know that?"

"He heard Aunt Patti and Uncle Joe talking." CJ pushed his plate away. "He said Dad was with a hooker."

"I don't know what to say, honey," Ellie said. "It's true. I'm very hurt and angry with your father right now. That's why I need some time to think, figure out what I want." She dug around in her purse and slid a cell phone across the table. "This is for you. You can call me anytime, if you need me or if you just want to talk."

CJ turned the phone over in his hands. "Any time? Can I call my friends, too?"

Ellie smiled. "After seven and all weekend." She handed him an envelope. "There's money in there for you to use. Don't spend it all at once, cause that's it."

"I don't want you to go." He looked at her with tears in his eyes.

"Did I mention that you can use my car until you leave for camp? I'm not taking it with me."

"Really?" CJ brightened a little. "Where are you going anyway?"

"New York," Ellie stated. "Sammy too."

"You're taking my dog?"

"Whose dog? You can't remember to feed him or let him out when you get home from school."

"Good point," CJ conceded. "I don't understand. Why would Dad do that?" He took a big bite of bacon and shook his head. "All my friends think you're hot."

"They do?" Ellie gulped. She hadn't thought of herself as *hot*.

"Well, for a mom." CJ smiled at his mother. "And you always feed everybody."

"Thanks."

"So why would Dad do that?" CJ asked again. "Doesn't he love you anymore?"

"I honestly don't know." Ellie picked up her coffee.

"He's a jerk. I don't want to be around him."

"Wait a minute. Just because your father and I have problems doesn't mean he doesn't deserve your respect," Ellie said sharply. "He loves you, don't forget that."

"Yeah, yeah." He finished his orange juice. "Did you quit your job?"

"I'll work remotely."

"We'll be okay, right, Mom?"

"We'll be just fine." Ellie took CJ's hand and squeezed it. "I'll come back if you need me, honey. Aunt Patti is right around the corner too. I'll be home before you get back from camp. And I'll call you every day."

"Not every day, Mom. Everybody will think I'm a baby."

"Okay, how about every other day?"

"That works. Are you going to eat your omelet?" CJ was already switching plates.

"Go ahead."

"Is Dad driving me to camp?"

"Yes, and if he can't then you can ride with Josh and Aunt Patti. I'll be there for parent's weekend." She looked at her watch again. "We have some time. Want to review your chemistry notes?"

* * *

Ellie and Patti pulled into the parking lot behind Charlie's law office. Patti's SUV was packed with Ellie's suitcases and several boxes. Sammy sat in the back, safely buckled in his doggie car seat. Patti was driving them to New York, spending the weekend, then driving home.

"You ready?" Patti asked.

"Yes, just keep the motor running. This won't take long." Ellie grabbed a large envelope and got out of the car.

Charlie's secretary greeted her with a smile. "Hi, Mrs. Newman. It's nice to see you."

"Nice to see you too, Tina." She pointed toward Charlie's closed office door. "Is he with a client?"

Tina shook her head. "No, he's not on the phone either. Just let me tell him you're here."

"No, I want to surprise him. It'll only take a minute."

"Sure, go right in. He'll be happy to see you."

"Thanks." Ellie went to the door and knocked softly.

"Yes, what is it, Tina?" Charlie's voice boomed.

Ellie opened the door, stepped in and shut it behind her. "Hi, Charlie."

He looked up from the pile of papers on his desk. "Ellie? Honey, what are you doing here?" He stood and came around the front of the desk. "What's wrong? You look pale."

"I'm leaving you," she blurted. She held out the envelope with a shaking hand.

"Leaving? Is this a joke?" He tried to take her arm. She wrenched herself away. "You're not making sense." Charlie gestured to a chair. "Sit down for a minute."

"No, I'm not staying." Ellie put the envelope on Charlie's desk. She tried to take a deep breath but her heart beat too fast. "I can't live like this anymore. I need some time."

"She doesn't mean anything to me, it's just... Shit, I don't know what it is."

"It's called infidelity. You took our marriage and trashed it." She poked at his chest. "You, not me. You." She turned to the door. "All I can see is you wrapped around the skank. I shut my eyes at night and I see it. I open my eyes in the morning and I still see it."

"Ellie, don't leave me." Charlie grabbed her shoulders. "I love you. I'm not letting you go."

"I don't believe you. And right now the sight of you makes me sick." She pulled away and opened the door a crack. "I paid the bills through July. There's enough money in the checking account to cover food and utilities."

"Wait, what about CJ and Sam?"

"CJ's due at camp at the end of the month. If you can't drive him, Patti will. I've taken care of him for seventeen years. You can do it for a month. Sammy's going with me."

"What am I supposed to tell him?" Charlie was getting angry.

"I told him this morning. He's okay with it."

"What?"

"I didn't have to tell him why I'm leaving. He knew. He's a bright kid. Be prepared for some flak, he's pretty disgusted with you."

"God I never..." Charlie closed his eyes. "Where are you going?"

"None of your business. If it's an emergency, CJ can find me. I'll call him every day."

"But not me," Charlie said.

"No, not you."

"I know you're mad but please, we have to work this out." Charlie's face was white and his fists were clenched. "We can't if we're not together."

"I don't know if we can work this out." Ellie opened the office door. "Look at it this way, now you'll have more time for your hooker." Ellie spoke loudly so Tina would hear. She stepped into the reception area with Charlie on her heels.

"Keep your voice down." Charlie looked around the office. "This is private."

"Private? You're meeting a hooker at a downtown hotel once a week and you want to keep it private?" Ellie shrieked.

Tina got up and ran toward the ladies room. Charlie's partner, Paul, opened his office door and stuck his head out.

"Hey, I've got a client in here."

"Sorry, Paul." Charlie grabbed Ellie's arm and tried to steer her into his office.

"Let go of me."

"You're hysterical." He tugged harder on her arm. "Let's go sit down and talk this out."

She struggled to get away but he was stronger.

"Let her go or I'll call the cops." Patti's voice rang out from the doorway.

"Stay out of it," Charlie ordered "This is between me and my wife."

Patti held out her cell phone. "I've pressed 911. You want me to press send?" Charlie dropped Ellie's arm.

"You coming, Ellie?" Patti held the door open.

"Let's blow this pop stand." Ellie walked out with her head held high.

* * *

"Thanks." Ellie clasped her hands together to stop the shaking. "I really left him."

"You sure did." Patti maneuvered the SUV through the city streets. She gestured to a large leather case resting on the seat next to Sammy. "Did you bring every CD you own?"

"No, just the important ones." Ellie gave her a watery smile.

"Let's have some tunes then. This is a road trip."

"Okay." She pulled a stack of CDs out. "I'm in the mood for Ray and BB and Bonnie Raitt, with a little Melissa Etheridge."

"Start with 'Hit the Road, Jack'." Patti floored it.

Chapter Six

That Patti is a great friend. She'd do anything for Ellie. But I did not ever figure she would get Ellie and Marsh together. Well, not together, but maybe they can help each other. I died before I told Ellie about Marshall. I wanted to, she would have understood and welcomed him. Not to mention helping me deal with Mom and Dad.

But it never happened and Marsh blames himself for that, still, after twelve years. Marsh and Ellie are the two best people I know. I was lucky to have them, but now it's time for all of us to move on. I'd like to hit the road too.

Marsh shoved the last photo album in the big trunk and locked it. He had scoured the apartment, gathering up all pictures of Kit. The place looked a little bare, but he didn't want Ellie to find them and wonder. He put a pitcher of iced tea in the fridge and got the coffeepot ready. Patti and Ellie were due any minute and he wanted to welcome them properly. Sheba sauntered into the kitchen and watched him with big green eyes.

"You better behave, old girl." Marsh picked up the cat and cuddled her. "You'll have a new playmate and you have to be nice to him." Sheba liked dogs. She had been very fond of Seth's dog, Django, a big goofy Labrador. She slept on Django's stomach and sampled his food regularly. The buzzer rang and Marshall put the cat down. "Showtime," he said.

Ellie and Patti rode the tiny elevator up to the seventh floor. They got Ellie's stuff out of the elevator and parked it in front of 7A. Sammy sniffed the hallway intensely.

"I have to move the car. I'll be back in a minute." Patti got on the elevator as the doors were closing.

"Okay, Sammy. Remember to be a good boy." Ellie pressed the buzzer. The door opened and a blond god stood there. Ellie felt a tug somewhere deep inside. Like she knew him and he knew her, like they understood each other.

"Ellie? You are Ellie?" Marshall's voice finally got through.

"Yes, sorry it's just so weird. I feel..." She noticed he was smiling down at her. Warm brown eyes and a mouth split into a grin. He took her arm gently.

"Where's Patti?" He looked around the hallway.

"She's..." Ellie couldn't remember where Patti was. Ellie was more concerned with the fact her legs had turned to jelly and the floor was rushing up to meet her.

Marshall saw Ellie's eyes roll back in her head as her body slumped. He grabbed her other arm and stopped her from crashing to the floor. The dog growled at him. Small but fierce, the beast bared his teeth.

"It's okay, boy," he said reassuringly.

Ellie's feet went out from under her and she slid to the floor, taking Marshall with her. The suitcases fell over while the boxes toppled and hit them. One of the boxes popped open and a pile of CDs scattered everywhere. Marshall was half on top of Ellie. The dog burrowed between them to lick her face and whine. Marshall rolled off Ellie, only to feel the crack of hard plastic CD cases under his back.

Sheba chose that moment to leap on his chest, meowing loudly. Abandoning his owner, the dog barked loudly. Hissing and puffing her fur, the cat dug sharp claws into Marshall's chest. The dog stuck his nose out at the cat. Claws out, Sheba swiped her paw at him. The dog yelped and reared back. Sheba scrabbled off Marshall's chest and ran into the apartment, the dog in hot pursuit. Marshall sat up and crunched some more CD cases. Ellie remained on the floor out cold.

The elevator doors opened and Patti arrived. "What the hell?"

"Hey, Patti. How's it going?" Marshall dabbed at the blood seeping from the scratches on his chest. Something crashed in the apartment.

* * *

"Ellie. C'mon Ellie, wake up." A cool, wet cloth passed over her face.

Ellie shuddered as the as the moisture dried on her skin. She opened her eyes and Patti's face loomed over her. She tried to sit but Patti pushed her down. She lay on a sofa, a big deep plush sofa. She was in an upholstered womb. "What happened?"

"You passed out in the hallway. Marshall carried you in here."

"Carried me?" Ellie closed her eyes. "He must be strong."

"He is, although he almost dropped you a couple of times." Sammy hopped on the sofa, sniffing and whining. He thrust his face at Ellie's and licked her cheek frantically.

"I'm okay, Sammy." Ellie patted the dog and made him lie next to her. "I wonder why I fainted."

"Low blood sugar. You've been living on coffee and adrenaline for the last month." Patti put her arm around Ellie's shoulders and held out a glass. "Drink this. It's iced tea with a lot of sugar."

Ellie sat up and took the glass. It felt cold and wet in her hand. She sipped at the tea. It trickled down her throat in a cool stream. She took another taste and held the glass in both hands.

"Better?" Patti asked. Ellie nodded. "Good, I'll make you something to eat. You need some protein."

"Where's Marshall?"

"He's putting your stuff in your room. I'll be right back." Patti got up, leaving Ellie and Sammy alone. The dog cuddled closer and sighed.

"Tough day, Sam." Ellie looked around the room. It was big and square, with floor-to-ceiling windows on the wall to the right. A marble fireplace with a cherry mantle filled the wall opposite the sofa. Comfortable-looking chairs sat in front of the windows with small tables

and lamps placed around the room. Ellie turned to survey the rest of the room. French doors opened across from the fireplace. A baby grand piano stood behind them. Oak floors with rugs placed in front of the fireplace and in the center of the room completed the decor. The place reeked of money and comfort. Used to banged-up, hand-me-down furniture, Ellie felt totally intimidated. A cat hopped up on the back of the sofa.

It startled her and she almost dropped her iced tea. She carefully placed the glass on the coffee table using a nearby coaster. She held Sammy next to her with one hand. Whining softly, his body quivered. The cat stretched out and regarded her with emerald green eyes. She was a tortoiseshell, all black and orange. Ellie noticed she had extra toes on her front paws. A little white around her muzzle and eyes showed her age.

“Hello, sweetie. You must be Sheba.” She slowly extended her free hand to the cat.

The cat didn’t move, only watched as Ellie rubbed one finger along her cheek. She spoke softly, telling the cat how pretty she was. She scratched behind the cat’s ears finally eliciting a rumbling purr. Sammy’s tail wagged furiously as he strained against Ellie’s hand.

“This won’t work.” Marshall pulled out a block of aged cheddar. “You’ll have to take her back to Buffalo.”

“Quiet, do you want her to hear you?”

“The woman passed out in front of me for God’s sake.” Marshall started slicing the cheese. “She’s clearly unstable and there could be something seriously wrong with her, like a brain tumor.”

Patti rolled her eyes. “Stop being such a drama queen.” She nibbled a piece. “Her blood sugar was low. She hasn’t been eating. With all the turmoil she hasn’t been sleeping. What the hell kind of cheese is this anyway? It tastes like old socks.”

“You eat old socks?” Marshall arranged crackers on the plate. “For your information, it’s aged Vermont cheddar. Very expensive.”

“Expensive doesn’t mean good. Haven’t you got any Parmesan?”

"On the counter." Marshall pointed to the hunk of cheese wrapped in butcher paper. "She can't stay here. That dog of hers scared Sheba. She'll probably hide for two months now." Marshall shook his head. "I'll have to board her."

Patti broke off a piece of Parmesan. "Ellie looks too much like Kit."

Marshall closed his eyes. "She even smells like him." His hands shook. "When I was holding her, I got this incredible rush, even though she was passed out. It was like he was back. It's too hard."

Patti poked his shoulder. "Stop wallowing. Ellie is Ellie. She's an incredible person. You'd like her if you gave her half a chance." She placed both hands on his shoulders. "Look at me." She turned his head. "I've kept this secret from her all these years, out of respect for your privacy. And because she's had enough to deal with, losing Kit and then her parents. Being married to that idiot, Charlie. But Kit would want you to help her."

"Does she know her brother was gay?"

"I don't think so. Nobody knew as far as that goes. Kit hid things well."

"She knows I'm gay, right?"

Patti cracked up. "Everybody knows you're gay. Geez, when *The Advocate* article was published, you became the most famous gay person from Buffalo."

"More famous than Michael Bennett?"

"Yeah, you're not dead," Patti replied. "I'm supposed to ask if you've prayed to be cured."

"Ma's been at it again?" Marshall rolled his eyes. "I thought she had a good time on her last visit."

"She and my mother both did." Patti grinned at him. "You and all your theater buddies were terrific to them."

"Took me a month to lose all the weight I gained when they were here," Marshall said. "Ma is still hoping for grandchildren."

"They go to mass every day and light candles for you." Patti grabbed his shoulders. "You'll let Ellie stay?"

"It was a stupid idea. She's going home with you." He picked up the plate of cheese and crackers and walked into the living room. He would be decent of course, but Ellie and her obnoxious little dog had to leave. Poor Sheba didn't have a chance.

When he got to the living room, poor Sheba was on her back in Ellie's lap batting at a gold chain that Ellie was swinging in front of her. The dog sat on the floor, alert, tail wagging. When Ellie saw Marshall, she smiled and he was knocked out by how much she looked like her brother. She nudged the dog. "Go say you're sorry." The dog crawled to Marshall, looked at him with pitiful brown eyes and whimpered.

"Sam. Say hello." Ellie's voice was firm. The dog got up, tail wagging, then lowered his front paws to the floor in a doggie bow. Finally he sat on his hind legs and waved his front paws at Marshall.

"Hi, Sam." Marshall put the plate on the coffee table and patted the wiggling little dog. "It's nice to meet you."

Marshall took a seat on the other end of the sofa. Sheba was stretched out on her side, still on Ellie's lap. It looked like Ellie was giving the cat a deep tissue massage.

"What have you done to my cat?" he asked.

Ellie continued to rub. "We're just getting acquainted. She's a very pretty girl." Sheba's face was screwed up in ecstasy as Ellie ran her fingers down her sides. The cat was drooling. "Poor baby has some arthritis in her shoulder and her hips."

"She does?" Marshall was astounded. Nobody, including Marshall, touched Sheba where Ellie did. Ellie rubbed the cat's paws going in between her toes.

"Just a little, some of her joints crackle a bit."

Ellie's green eyes were lovely, wide, surrounded by almost invisible red lashes. "Don't feel bad, cats are great compensators, but she should probably take glucosamine. It'll help her joints." There was that smile again. "I'll get some for her. Most pet stores carry it."

"Thanks." The dog put his paws on Marshall's leg and looked at the plate of cheese longingly. "Can he have some?"

"Just a little. I'm sorry about before, I've never fainted. It was just that..."

"You better eat something." Marshall grabbed a cracker, put some cheese on it and handed it to her. "I haven't got the strength to carry you anywhere else."

Ellie nodded and crunched down. He handed her more. She ate wordlessly, staring at him. The cat slept in her lap and the dog lay at her feet. She touched Marshall's arm lightly. "You are as nice as Patti said you were. I remember why I had a crush on you when I was thirteen. Except now I think you're better looking."

"You're not so bad yourself." Marshall returned her smile. She was beautiful, despite her wrinkled shirt and shorts, and the bruises under her eyes.

"Did you tell her?" Patti's voice boomed from the doorway.

"Tell me what?" Ellie asked.

"That your room has a place for your laptop, so you can work if you want." He stood and held out his hand. "C'mon, I'll show you."

Patti gave him the thumbs up as he led Ellie out of the room.

Chapter Seven

We smell the same? I never knew. Must be more to genetics than I thought. There's a connection between them. Ellie felt it right away. Marshall is fighting it. Not for long though. Ellie has a way with people, with animals too. Sheba likes her. Can't believe the old girl is still around. I saved her life and she saved mine. Marshall is a big believer in second chances. So when I gave him the cat, he took me back. Not that he should have, not that I deserved it. But he did, and he kept right on loving me.

Someone played "Ode to Joy". Ellie opened her eyes and grabbed her new cell phone. For a moment she didn't know where she was, she had slept so soundly. Sammy slept beside her. She picked up her phone.

"Mom?"

"Hi, honey." Ellie looked at the clock beside the bed. "You're up early for a Saturday. It's only eight o'clock."

"Grandma's here," he whispered. "She's ripping Dad a new one."

"Good grief, how did she find out?" Ellie grabbed her robe.

"I told her," CJ said proudly.

"Why did you do that?" Ellie asked. "She'll drive your father crazy."

"I don't know why I did. She called last night, looking for you, and it kind of slipped out."

"You told her everything?"

"Yeah, I think she's kind of mad at you for not telling her you were leaving. But she's really mad at Dad." His voice dropped again. "She wants to clean my room. You have to make her stay out."

"Honey, nobody tells your grandmother what to do. Clean it yourself."

"Mom," CJ whined.

"I can feel your eyes rolling."

"Okay, okay. Hey, hang on a minute."

Another voice came on the line. "Ellie? Where in hell are you?" Charlie was angry. "I've been worried sick."

"I'm fine." Ellie sat on the edge of the bed and reached for Sammy. "Put CJ back on the phone."

"Listen for a minute, please, honey," Charlie pleaded. "I know you're mad and you have every right to be. But we need to be together. Running away isn't the answer."

"Mad? You think this is just a snit?" Ellie started to pace around the room. "Do you know how much you hurt me? How this is killing me? I can barely function. All I can think about is the fact that you trashed almost nineteen years of marriage for a call girl."

"I know, I understand."

"No, you don't understand. If you did, you wouldn't have done it." She stopped pacing. "I don't want to talk to you. Put CJ on or I'm hanging up."

"Please, please listen."

Ellie's voice dropped to a whisper. "Tell CJ I'll call him later." She pressed the end button and threw the phone on the bed. She saw Marshall standing in the bedroom doorway. "Who opened my door?"

"Sheba did." Marshall pointed to the cat sniffing Ellie's Adidas. "I didn't want to disturb you." He put his hands in his pockets. "Sorry."

She looked him up and down. No man should look this good in a plain white T-shirt, faded jeans and bare feet. His hair was still damp from the shower.

"It's okay. Doesn't matter." She gulped and turned so he wouldn't see the tears.

"Everything okay at home?"

She flopped on the bed. "Great. My son probably hates me. I half expect my mother-in-law to move in so she can take care of her baby in his time of need." She pulled a pillow over her head. "Kill me, kill me now."

"No, then I'd have to get rid of the body." Marshall walked into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "Besides, you promised to take care of my cat." He pulled her to a sitting position. He grinned at her and handed her a tissue.

"Thanks." She wiped her eyes. "Are you this nice to every crazy messed-up female who crosses your path?"

"Just the ones with red hair and big green eyes." He patted her shoulder. "Get moving. I'll make coffee, then we'll take Sam out." He stood and walked to the door.

"God, you look amazing, coming and going," Ellie blurted.

He wiggled his butt a little. "Don't fall for me, kid. I'll break your heart." He winked at her over his shoulder.

"Somebody beat you to it."

Marshall took her on a tour of the neighborhood. Entranced by everything, Sammy was especially frisky as they walked in Central Park.

"He's a very happy dog, isn't he?" Marshall observed.

"Yes, he's always in a good mood. He's the light of my life." Ellie bent down and patted Sam. "Unconditional love is a tremendous gift. I don't know what I would do without him."

"Too bad humans can't love unconditionally."

"Mothers do."

"Not my mother," Marshall said. "She didn't speak to me for a year after I told her I was gay."

"I'll bet she loved you the whole time," Ellie replied. "It was probably the shock. Not to mention giving up her expectations of what your life would be."

They left the park and continued up Central Park West toward 80th Street.

“Well, she didn’t plan on me becoming a gay actor, that’s for sure.” Marshall took Ellie’s hand. “What would you do if your son told you he was gay?”

“I’d like to think I would be okay with it. But I’d worry about him more. It can’t be an easy life.” They turned onto 80th. “Why are we going this way? Isn’t your place the other way?”

“Heaven is just around the corner,” Marshall said.

“Heaven? Right here in Manhattan?” Ellie laughed.

“Definitely. We’re going to Zabbar’s.”

“The best deli in New York? Within walking distance?” Ellie skipped a couple of steps. “You’re right, heaven.”

Chapter Eight

I loved Zabbar's. The smells, the samples. We would get bagels and lox, coffee and anything else that looked good. We spent Sunday mornings in bed, feasting. Sometimes we had friends over in the afternoons. People we trusted to keep my secrets. I miss the pleasure of food, the smell of coffee, lying with my lover on soft sheets.

Seth Viera signaled the flight attendant for another drink. She gave him a toothy smile and filled his champagne glass. "Leave the bottle?" he asked politely, turning his big sable eyes on the woman.

"Can't do that sir, but I'll be back anytime you need a refill." She gestured to the man next to him. "Is your friend okay?"

Seth glanced over at Ollie. He slumped in his seat, snoring, straggly blond hair held back by a pair of headphones. The volume on his iPod was so loud Seth could hear the thumping hip-hop. "He's fine, just hates to fly is all." Seth took his napkin and wiped the drool from the corner of Ollie's mouth. "He took a Xanax before we boarded, figured he could sleep all the way to New York."

"Oh, well if you need anything, just ring the bell." The flight attendant jumped a little when Ollie let out a particularly loud snort.

Seth poked Ollie, trying to lessen his snores. But Ollie continued unabated. Seth almost wished he had taken a Xanax. He drained his champagne glass and closed his eyes. He still couldn't believe he was on a plane back to New York. His first major gig a bust before it even started and all because he couldn't mind his own damn business. Ollie snorted again. Seth had gotten him fired too. All because he decided to be a hero.

When they heard the screams and cries coming from Maizie Triumph's suite that night, Seth decided she was in big trouble. He and Ollie called hotel security, who opened the door and called the police. Seth charged into the suite and found Maizie tied naked to the bed, while her tour manager slapped her. Seth punched the guy out while Ollie untied Maizie. Hotel security pulled Seth off in mid punch. That was when Maizie landed a solid right hook on Seth's jaw.

By the time everything was calm again, it was clear Maizie was a masochist. Seth and Ollie were fired and put on the first available plane to New York.

Well, it would be good to be home. Marshall was leaving for the summer. Seth could take care of Sheba, get lots of exercise running with Django in the park and, most of all, have solitude. At thirty, it was time to figure out what he wanted to do with his life. Plus, he could always pick up gigs here and there. He would compose, meditate and practice. And stay away from women, all women. The debacle in Europe proved women were nothing but trouble.

* * *

Ellie and Sammy completed their turn around the reservoir in Central Park. At a little over one and half miles, it was the perfect morning walk. Sammy was endlessly fascinated with the other dogs. He had adjusted to their new routine easily. Better than Ellie had. She missed CJ and Patti, even though she talked to both of them every day. She missed Charlie, but wondered if she missed him specifically or if she just missed having someone to sleep with.

Ellie grinned at the doorman as she passed. A week in New York and she was in love with the city more than ever. She pressed seven on the elevator pad. A nice hot shower and then coffee while she read the newspaper.

She let herself into the apartment and almost tripped over a suitcase standing in the hall. Was Marshall back? Sheba came out and plopped in

front of her. Ellie picked her up and headed to the kitchen. She heard the refrigerator door open.

“Marshall, is that you?”

She turned the corner into the kitchen and saw the most perfect male bottom ever. Firm, round, extremely touchable. It sat atop strong well-muscled legs. Ellie gasped. The naked bottom turned around. Ellie stood like a deer caught in the headlights, unable to look away. A beautiful naked man stood in the light of the fridge. His dark wet hair streamed past his broad muscular shoulders. There was a nice mat of curly hair on his chest, with pink nipples peeking out. It thinned as it traveled down his flat stomach, then got denser and coarser as it... My God. Ellie couldn't help but stare. This guy could have a career as a porn star. She tried to look away, anywhere but at his enormous...

Wait, was it getting bigger as she stared? Good grief, it was.

Finally she managed to look at his face. The guy was staring back at her, his gaze focused on her breasts. She glanced down at herself and saw her nipples poking through the thin cotton of her T-shirt.

Sammy came running into the kitchen at that moment, took notice of the guy and did what all dogs do when they see a stranger, he started to bark. He jumped up on the guy's legs and took a good long whiff of his crotch. Sammy barked louder as if impressed with the size of the man's parts. Did dogs have penis envy?

The man dropped the carton he had been holding. Milk spilled all over his front, on the floor and on the dog. Sammy yelped and started to shake himself, slipping and sliding. Ellie put Sheba down and made a mad grab for Sammy, which put her at eye level with the part she had been staring at. It was more impressive up close. The man backed away and tried to cover himself with his hands. He slipped on the floor and landed on his back. Ellie shoved Sammy out of the way. The guy was trying to get up but only succeeded in falling again. Ellie grabbed a dishtowel to start wiping up the milk and instead let it flutter over the man's crotch. It made a nice little tent.

“Just who the fuck are you?” he asked.

* * *

"What happened? Why are you home?" Marshall sat in his dressing room eating a small salad. Television added weight. He wasn't pleased when he saw himself at rehearsal and decided to drop ten pounds.

"There was a big misunderstanding and I was replaced," Seth said. "Look, it doesn't matter. I know I should have called to let you know I was coming back but there really wasn't a lot of time." Seth's voice trailed off.

"Are you okay? You're not sick or anything?" Marshall took another bite of salad.

"No, I'm fine, just tired." Seth paused. "The important thing is that I'm home. I can take care of Sheba, so you can send your babysitter back to wherever you found her."

"Ellie isn't going anywhere," Marshall stated. "I promised her she could stay for the summer. Besides she's taking great care of Sheba. Did you know she has arthritis?"

"Is that why she's staying, because she has arthritis?" Seth's voice sounded puzzled.

"No, Sheba has arthritis, you dummy. Ellie's taking good care of her, isn't she?"

"I suppose. But I could take care of the damn cat, Marsh."

"Damn cat?" Marshall laughed. "Your care and concern are touching."

"Marsh, come on. I really wanted to have some alone time, you know, practice, compose. How can I do that if she's underfoot? And that damn dog of hers. It almost bit my...never mind."

"Sammy's a nice little guy, he wouldn't hurt anybody. And Sheba likes him too." Marshall looked at the clock. "I have to go. They need me on set." Marshall stood. "It's a 2400-square-foot apartment. There's room

enough for everybody, and if you really can't stand it, you can always move. Tell Ellie I'll call her later." Marshall hung up.

Seth sighed and put the phone down. Move? Marshall knew he couldn't afford to move. Seth owed Marshall rent money. He had planned on paying with the money he earned this summer. Instead, he was broke, flat broke. He could pick up some gigs and maybe teach to earn food money. If Marshall wouldn't make her leave, well Seth would. Time to pick up his dog.

Ellie, Sammy and Sheba hid out in her bedroom until she heard Seth leave. After their encounter this morning, she didn't want to face him until absolutely necessary. She pictured him naked on the kitchen floor covered in milk. How could anyone expect her to live with this guy? She was going to call Patti when her cell phone rang.

"Ellie, it's Marshall."

"Marsh, I wanted to talk to you." Ellie continued to pet Sheba. "Your roommate came back today."

"Yeah, I know. He was supposed to be in Europe for the summer."

"So, I guess you don't need me anymore." Ellie knew he would ask her to leave.

"What? Nobody said that," Marshall said quickly. "Look, we have a deal. You get some time to think and I get the best cat sitter in the world."

"But if Seth is around, he can take care of Sheba," Ellie protested. "I don't want to be in his way."

"It's my apartment, my home. Seth doesn't even pay rent most of the time. And if he gets a job out of town, he'll be gone again. Do you want to go home? Is that it?"

"No, no. I love it here." Ellie sighed in relief. "I can't tell you how much it means to me, having time to do what I want. I feel like I've been let out of prison. I miss my son and Patti of course."

"What about your husband?"

"Yes, I guess. Although I'm still hurting, you know? I don't want to see him right now. I feel so betrayed. And a little selfish."

"Sounds like you should be a little selfish."

"So tell me about Seth. He's a musician, right?"

"A very talented one. He plays most string instruments, guitar especially. And he can hold his own at the piano too. He's a good guy really, just a little rough around the edges." Marshall's voice dropped. "He hasn't had an easy time of it. His mother died when he was young and his dad raised him. He died recently too."

"Oh, another orphan, like me," Ellie said.

"Exactly. He doesn't make a good first impression, but deep down he's a sweetheart."

He makes a good first impression, especially naked and half-erect. "Okay, I'll stay." Ellie smiled into the phone. "So what's happening out there?"

"Hurry up and wait. I forgot how boring this can be. They decided I need a girlfriend, so they're writing one in."

"Ooooh, love scenes. Are you taking your shirt off?"

"Probably, I better do more crunches." Marshall laughed. "Hey wait a minute, you like to look at my chest?"

"Well, I always thought it was a high point on your old show."

"Geez, and all this time I thought it was my acting."

"That, too." Ellie snickered "I liked watching you and Annie in bed. It was hot."

"Thanks for understanding about Seth. I really appreciate it."

"We'll all get along just great I'm sure."

"Have you met Django yet?" Marsh asked.

"No, who's Django?"

"He's Seth's obnoxious dog. Completely without manners," Marshall said. "He's a very friendly dog, loves women."

“A humper?”

“Yes and a crotch sniffer. Big too. Seth says he’s a Labrador, but I think he’s a mutt.”

“Does he like other dogs?”

“He likes everybody, in a sexual way of course. The dog is a maniac.”

Ellie was giggling. “I know how to handle him. Don’t worry about a thing.”

“You sure?”

“Hey, I can handle an oversexed dog,” Ellie said. “It’s his owner I’m not too sure about.”

“He and I go way back.”

“Okay, I’ll deal.”

“Thanks, Ellie-Belly. I’ve got to go, they’re looking for me on the set.”

“Break a leg,” she replied. It was after Marsh hung up that she stopped to wonder how he knew her nickname.

* * *

Django was ecstatic to see Seth. Seth hugged him and thumped him while the dog whimpered in delight. Django had stayed with Seth’s old girlfriend, Sara. Sara loved Django even though she was no longer fond of Seth.

“He still humps everything in sight.” Sara gathered up Django’s stuff. “He really needs obedience classes.”

“Why? He listens to me.” Seth rubbed his dog’s belly. “He’ll calm down, he’s only two.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “Well, now that you’re back, maybe you can train him.”

Seth stood and put his arm around Sara. “He loves you. You’re great with him.” He nuzzled Sara’s neck. “You’re great with me too.” He smiled when her breath hitched a little.

Sara pulled away. "Cut it out." She moved to the kitchen table where all Django's stuff was piled. "I have a date and I need to get ready." She crossed her arms in front of her.

"A date?" Seth smirked. "Do people still do that?" He sidled up to her. "Why don't you forget the date and I'll make us dinner here?" Seth got his arm around her and drew her close. "I could give you a nice long massage."

Sara turned to him "Did Marshall kick you out?"

"No, he didn't kick me out. I miss you and I thought that maybe..."

Sara pushed him. "It took me six months to get over you. I'm not going through this again." She poked a finger in his chest. "You are emotionally unavailable, obsessed with your music and way too much trouble."

"Sara, c'mon, I'm not obsessed." Seth backed away from the poking finger. "I'm dedicated, that's all."

"Whatever." Sara shoved Django's dog food into a cloth shopping bag. "Better get going. I'm running late."

It took almost an hour for Seth and Django to get home. Seth wasn't sure why the leggy redhead bothered him enough to make him hit on Sara. He didn't want to go back to Sara. She wanted more than he could give her or any woman for that matter.

Women, while a terrific diversion, could never be as important as his music. Most people didn't realize the perseverance and practice it took to be a working musician. Long hours, lousy working conditions, endless competition and crappy money quickly weeded out all but the most determined or crazy, depending on how you looked at things. Marshall understood. Life as an actor was much the same.

His thoughts turned back to Ellie. He had to get rid of her. Not that she would be a distraction. She wasn't his type, too tall for one thing. He preferred petite women who fit snugly under his arm. She was only an inch or two shorter than him. Too old for another, she had to be pushing thirty-five. Her body was nothing spectacular, although he liked the way her nipples poked through her shirt. And his dick had certainly reacted

to her stare. But that was because he hadn't been laid in awhile. He would have reacted the same way if any woman stared at him. Of course, her legs were spectacular, long milky white thighs, muscular. He bet they would feel like a vise wrapped around him. He imagined running his hands over her smooth calves and trim ankles.

Jesus, his jeans were getting uncomfortable. It didn't matter how great her legs were, he wouldn't see them again or ever feel them wrapped around him. Django would drive her and her wussy little dog back to wherever they came from.

Ellie was in the kitchen when she heard the door open. The sound of nails scrabbling on the floor alerted her. She grabbed the squirt gun as the dog came careening into the kitchen. He let out a yowl as he spotted Ellie. She brought the gun up and squirted at his nose. The dog immediately backed away and began sneezing. He recovered quickly and headed straight for Ellie. She squirted him directly in the nose. This time she followed him as he backed off, sneezing. She put her hand on his rump and said firmly, "Django, down." The dog crouched on his haunches and slowly lay down. "Good boy." She patted his head. His tail swished. "Now, no more jumping."

She sat on the floor next to him and his body quivered. "It's okay, Django." She allowed him to sniff the back of her hand. He was tentative at first but then crawled to her and put his head in her lap. "You're a good boy. I'm sorry I had to do that, but you need to learn some manners." She stroked his head and scratched his ears. "Now later if you're very good, I'll introduce you to Sammy. He loves other dogs. And then we'll have a nice dinner."

He grunted as if he understood her and sidled his head around to take a long sniff of her crotch.

"Well, I guess you'll need a few more lessons."

Seth waited a good two minutes before he came into the kitchen. He was surprised there wasn't any shouting or sounds of glass breaking.

Maybe Django had her up on the table or maybe he had her pinned to the floor, while he humped away.

"Hi, Seth." Ellie looked up. She sat with Django's head in her lap. His eyes were closed as she ran her finger up his nose and back. "So is he named after Django Reinhardt?"

Seth opened his mouth to reply but the words weren't there. He gulped and finally mumbled, "Yeah, you know who he is?"

"Was," Ellie replied. She got to her feet and kept the dog lying on the floor with one push of her hand. "The greatest jazz guitarist of his generation. He played with Stephane Grappelli in the thirties until the war separated them. He died in 1953. Too young." Ellie shook her head sadly.

"Okay, you know who he is," Seth allowed. "Where's your dog?"

Ellie gestured to the closed maid's room. "In there. I thought it best if we introduced the dogs to each other gradually."

Seth heard snuffling and whining from behind the door. "He seems pretty anxious."

"Yes, he is. You hold on to Django and I'll get Sammy."

"Django's a little crazy around other dogs," Seth warned.

"Does he hurt them?" Ellie paused in front of the door.

"No, no. He's too enthusiastic is all." Seth grabbed Django's collar. "He wouldn't hurt anybody...on purpose."

Ellie opened the door and scooped up the wriggling Sam. Seth held Django with both hands. Django strained to get away and rush Ellie. She pulled a squirt gun out of her pocket and pointed it while saying, "Down, Django!" The dog dropped to the floor and whimpered softly. Seth found himself on the floor with him as Ellie approached. She sat next to them and let the dogs get acquainted. Both their tails wagged furiously. They sniffed at each other and whined. Finally Ellie set Sam down. "Let him go." She gestured to Django. "But be ready to grab him if he gets too rough."

Seth let his dog go and the two dogs busily tried to sniff each other's privates. They circled each other as their human companions watched. Django attempted to hump Sammy, but Sam nipped at the bigger dog's soft underbelly, which made Django rethink that move. After a few minutes, Ellie gave each dog a pig's ear. Django gnawed on his immediately, while Sam paraded around the kitchen with it hanging out of his mouth.

"Why is he doing that?" Seth was astonished at how well the dogs got along.

"We call it the pig's ear parade, not sure why he does it though." Ellie shrugged. "I think he's looking for a place to hide it."

Seth laughed. "He better hide it well or Django's sure to swipe it."

"No problem, I have lots." She got to her feet and moved to the stove. There was a big pot on it along with a large sauté pan. "This is ready." She picked up the pot and poured the contents in a colander in the sink. The scent of bacon, onions and tomatoes drifted to him. She shook the colander to drain the pasta, carried it back to the stove and dumped it into the simmering sauce.

"What are you making?" The smells made his stomach rumble.

"Bucatini Amatriciana." Ellie stirred. "Basically pasta with a sauce made of pancetta, onion and tomatoes." She glanced over. "Do you want some? There's plenty."

Boy did he ever. He was starving. But if he accepted food from her, how could he get rid of her? His stomach rumbled again as if to argue. "No, thanks, I already ate. Pasta is too heavy anyway. I try to stick to salads."

"I'll just put the leftovers in fridge, in case you want a snack later." Ellie smiled at him as she filled her plate.

"Sure, umm thanks." Seth smiled back. "I need to see about a gig. C'mon, Django, let's roll."

Django looked at him, snorted and went back to his pig's ear.

"I'll watch him," Ellie said from her seat at the kitchen table. She wiggled her fingers at the dog. He trotted over to her and laid his head on her lap, eyes full of slavish devotion.

Seth shook his head and left the kitchen. His dog was a traitor, bought for a pig's ear. The sound of Ellie's voice talking nonsense to the two dogs followed him out of the apartment.

Chapter Nine

Seth, of course, Seth. His dad was a good friend, one of the most talented musicians I'd ever heard. Seth was a punky kid when I was around. I wonder if he is as talented as his dad.

Ellie was just leaving the apartment when Jesus the day doorman buzzed. Ellie hung on to the dogs' leashes and pressed the talk button. "Hey, Jesus, what's up?"

"Morning, Ellie. Flowers for Marshall. But he's not a delivery guy."

"That's kind of strange." She looked toward Seth's closed bedroom door. He was still sleeping.

"I'm on my way down." If the guy didn't look right, Jesus and the dogs would protect her.

When Ellie got to the lobby, she saw a man holding a big vase of red roses. He was tall and had red hair, much like her own. He turned as he heard her and the dogs approach. Ellie took in cornflower blue eyes and a tentative smile.

"Hello, I'm Ellie." She held out her hand.

The man set the flowers down on a table, shook her hand and looked at the two dogs, who were avidly sniffing his sneakers.

"Jamie, Jamie Jordan." He gestured to the flowers. "I didn't know Marshall was out of town. I should have checked first, but I saw these and I wanted to thank him. Seemed like a good idea at the time." He crouched down and petted the two dogs. "I didn't know Marshall had dogs." He glanced up at Ellie sadly. "Or a girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" She glared at Jesus, who had developed a sudden interest in the paper. She shook her head. "I'm not his girlfriend."

"You aren't?" Jamie stood up straight. He looked a little relieved.

"What did you want to thank him for?"

"He helped me get an agent, and..." Jamie glanced away, ears red. "Never mind."

Ellie knew a crush when she saw it, even as the dogs yanked her to the door. "I have to walk these guys. Want to come with me? We could get a cup of coffee."

"Sure, why not." Jamie smiled down at her. "But what about the flowers?"

"Jesus will take them up for me." Ellie shot Jesus a look. The doorman nodded.

* * *

They walked in the park and, after the dogs completed their business, they got coffee and grabbed an outside table at Starbucks. Sam and Django lay at their feet after scoping out the area for any dropped food.

"Have you known Marshall for long?" Ellie asked.

"We were in *Company* together." He played with his coffee cup, long fingers tapping on the outside. "He was Bobby, I was in the chorus. Did you see the show?"

"No, I wanted to, but I couldn't." She was supposed to go with Patti, but Charlie was bitching about money, so Ellie had stayed home. "It got great reviews. So did Marshall."

"He did. The show was sold out almost every night." Jamie smiled. "He was so generous with everybody. No snits, no special treatment. Totally cool."

"Sounds like him. You really like him, don't you?"

"Yeah, and I blew it." Jamie shook his head. "He thinks I hustled him."

"Why would he think that?"

"We had a closing party, I made sure we shared a cab ride." He colored red. "Anyway the next morning, he couldn't wait for me to leave. He offered to get his agent to see me. That's huge, his agent is the best."

"He thinks that's what you were after? An in with his agent?"

Jamie nodded. "I don't blame him really, but I figured since he was trying so hard to get rid of me, I might as well take him up on his offer. Have you been friends for a long time?"

"We both grew up in Buffalo, but I don't know him all that well."

"But you're taking care of his place?"

"We're helping each other out," Ellie said. "I ran away from home, you see."

A half an hour, a muffin and another cup of coffee later, Ellie had poured out the whole story. Jamie turned out to be an excellent listener and Ellie liked him.

"Gutsy, leaving your whole life behind like that," Jamie said.

"Wasn't much of a life. I miss my son and my friend." She touched Jamie's red hair. "You remind me of my son, same red hair and blue eyes."

They walked back to the apartment and Ellie kissed Jamie on the cheek. "Thanks for the coffee and the conversation. I promise I'll tell Marshall about the flowers."

"I was wondering if we could do this again." Jamie took her hand. "Maybe a movie or dinner?"

"You want to hang out with an old lady like me?"

"You're not old and you're fun to hang out with."

"I am?"

"You are," Jamie replied. "Besides us carrot tops should stick together."

"Sure, I'd like that." They exchanged phone numbers. Some nice people lived in New York.

* * *

Ellie rolled over and looked at the digital clock beside her bed, 2:39 a.m. Despite the closed door, the sounds of guitar music penetrated her room.

Clapton. Seth was playing like Slowhand tonight. Last night it had been BB King, the night before Bonnie Raitt on the slide guitar. Ellie sat up. The dogs, both of them, were curled on the unoccupied half of the bed. Sheba slept on the other pillow, snoring softly. At least somebody was getting some rest. Repositioning her body, she flipped the pillow to the cool side and closed her eyes. Who would Seth play like tomorrow?

The next time the clock read 5:42 a.m. Now he was doing a passable Stevie Ray Vaughan.

She tiptoed into the living room, hoping to scare the bejesus out of the inconsiderate jerk but the dogs' toenails on the hardwood gave her away. He sat on the piano bench, a pencil clutched in his teeth.

"What?" He had the nerve to look angry.

"It's been written," Ellie said. "That riff sounds like 'Moonglow'."

"No way." Seth looked down at his sheet music.

Ellie sang the opening bars of the song to illustrate.

"Shit." Seth crumpled up the paper and threw it on the floor. Sighing, Django ambled over and rested his body on Seth's feet. The guitar landed on the top of the piano. "Was there something else?"

"Did you know it's after five in the morning?" Ellie ventured a little farther into the room.

"So?" Seth stretched. "You have to create when the mood is right."

"Too bad your muse liked 'Moonglow' so much," Ellie replied. "But I never heard Stevie Ray Vaughan play it."

“Now what are you talking about?” Seth crossed his arms, accenting his well-defined biceps. Ellie felt a tingle and looked down at her thin T-shirt. Damn, she crossed her arms over her breasts.

“You were mimicking Stevie’s style and earlier tonight it was Eric Clapton.” She sat on the couch and covered up with the blanket she found there. “I’ve heard BB King and Bonnie Raitt too.”

“Has it kept you awake?” Seth asked a small smirk on his face.

“No, not really.” She made room as Sheba and Sammy joined her on the couch. “It did get me wondering though.” She rubbed Sheba’s back. “Why don’t you play like yourself? Shouldn’t you have your own style?”

“What would you know about it?” He glared at her some more. Django got up, hopped on the couch and snuggled behind Ellie’s legs. “You’ve stolen my dog too. What’s it going to take to get you out of here?”

Chapter Ten

Seth saw Ellie shrink into the sofa as tears started to spill down her cheeks. Her dog whined and cuddled deeper into her lap. Django, the traitor, licked her hand. Seth suddenly felt awful, taking out his frustrations on this strange woman.

"What are you crying about?" he demanded as he took the chair across from the sofa.

"I'm overjoyed at your warm welcome." A tissue appeared in her hand. She mopped up her face and turned her green eyes on him. "What exactly have I done to make you so hostile?"

She looked like a little girl, red hair going every which way, as she huddled under the blanket surrounded by her animals. Her eyes bored into him. Make that a pissed off little girl.

"You're here."

"That's it?" She took another swipe at her nose. "My very presence annoys you?"

"Don't take it personally," he replied. "I'd feel this way about any woman."

"Oh, so you're one of those gay men who hate women. I see." Ellie nodded.

"What!" Seth shot out of his chair and stood over Ellie. "I'm not gay." He pointed emphatically at Ellie's face. "Not gay." He pointed again. "Got that?"

Ellie nodded, clutching her dog even closer. "Okay, not gay. Maybe just a woman-hating sociopath?"

Seth moved away from her slowly, taking deep breaths. He finally sat in the chair again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I don't hate women either."

"Could have fooled me." Django snorted as if in agreement.

Seth sighed. "It's just that I really need solitude right now."

"You've seen me like four times in the last week. We've exchanged five sentences and your contributions were grunts," Ellie said. "I've done everything I could to stay out of your way."

Seth knew it was true. She had been courteous, always leaving him half a pot of coffee in the morning. There were leftovers in the fridge complete with notes. "Finish this please. I made too much." She took Django for walks whenever she took Sam. She spent a lot of time in her room with her laptop, working he assumed. Music came from behind her door, good stuff. She had long phone conversations. He found himself curious about who took up so much of her time.

"This is a bad time for me and I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings."

"You haven't hurt my feelings at all." Ellie sniffled. "I'm just wondering, if I did leave, what would your excuse be then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm an excuse for you not to develop your own voice. You have an amazing talent. I wish I was good at something, anything, as you are with music. But instead, you write songs that have been written and mimic other musicians." Ellie stopped. She put her hand over her mouth, as if to stop herself from saying more.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to be a musician?" Seth grumbled.

"Oh, boohoo, wallow away." She stood up. "Before you know it you'll be forty and still composing 'Moonglow'." She headed to the kitchen. "I'll make coffee and then take the dogs out."

Seth watched her stomp off to the kitchen. She had a great ass. Even through the baggy shorts.

* * *

When Ellie and the dogs returned, Seth was at the stove lifting bacon out of the pan. Food and water were set out for the dogs and Sheba snoozed on the kitchen windowsill. Ellie stood in the kitchen doorway mouth open.

"How do you like your eggs?" Seth asked.

"Over easy."

"I can do scrambled." Seth grinned at her.

"My other favorite." Ellie looked at him warily. "Did you start taking your medication again?"

Seth cracked eggs in the bowl and started whisking them. "I'm trying to apologize."

Ellie went around him, got mugs down and poured coffee. "So this means you won't try to get me to leave?"

Seth nodded. "Can you make some toast?" He slid the eggs into the pan. "You can tell me how you know so much about music."

"My brother took me to a Ray Charles concert when I was twelve." Ellie put rye bread in the toaster. "By the time I was fifteen, I had seen Ray twice, BB King, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor and James Brown. He saved me from Bon Jovi and the other musical dreck of the eighties." She took the coffee to the table. "Then he got me hooked on Stephane Grappelli, Dave Brubeck, Ray Brown, Stan Getz and John Coltrane." She sat down. "My friends thought I was pretty weird."

"Sounds like quite an education." Seth shoveled the eggs onto plates, added the bacon and toast. "Do you work in music now?" He brought the food to the table.

Ellie shook her head and took a bite of her eggs. After she swallowed, she said, "I majored in biology in college. I wanted to be a vet." She paused. "But that didn't work out so I became a technical writer."

"Yuck," Seth blurted "That sounds..."

"Perfectly awful?" Ellie crunched a piece of bacon.

"I'm sorry. It's probably interesting." He forked up some eggs.

"It isn't interesting. I use about two percent of my brain." She sipped her coffee. "I hate it."

"Then why do it? I couldn't stand doing something that I hated."

"It pays the bills, keeps my son in Reeboks, all the usual reasons."

"You have a son? Where is he? Stashed in a closet somewhere?"

"With his dad right now. He's off to summer camp this weekend."

"You deserted your child?" There was ice in Seth's tone "What kind of mother does that?"

"I didn't desert him. I talk to him every day. He's seventeen and very happy to use my car while I'm gone." Ellie stared down at her plate. "I miss him so much." Her words were spoken so softly Seth almost didn't hear them.

Seth handed her a paper napkin to wipe her eyes and continued to eat.

Chapter Eleven

I made Ellie a dedicated jazz and blues freak. I did take her to see Ray Charles at age twelve. I told Mom it was a church function. It was a religious experience for Ellie with Ray in rare form that night. The Raylettes completely entranced Ellie as they swished in chiffon gowns. From then on, she was hooked. I took her to see a lot of great artists during the next few years. Ellie soaked up the music like a sponge. Seth should listen to my sister, she knows her stuff.

That's right, Ellie wanted to be a vet. It was all she talked about when she was a teenager. She volunteered at the SPCA and worked in a vet's office during the summer. Damn Charlie anyway. She planned to go after he finished law school. I suppose me dying didn't help either. Ellie had her hands full, with CJ, our parents and her dopey husband. She never got her turn.

Ellie and Jamie turned the corner. They met to run every day. Jamie was faster, but she was getting better all the time and loved having a running partner. They slowed as they approached the apartment as a big group of people blocked the way.

"Looks like reporters," Jamie said. "Some of them have cameras and mikes."

"Wonder who they're looking for?" Ellie grabbed Jamie's arm and pushed her way through the throng. Jesus opened the door and pulled them into the building.

"What's going on?" Ellie asked.

"They're waiting for Mr. Marshall. I saw him on CNN. That girl he's working with overdosed in his hotel suite."

"Say again?"

Jesus shooed them to the elevator. "Go, it'll be on again soon. CNN!"

Ellie tried Marshall's cell and got voicemail. At least a dozen messages waited on the home telephone, all from reporters, none from Marshall. They made coffee and waited for the news update.

A skinny, dark-haired news correspondent stood in front of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Not much information, other than the teen star—Clarissa Montgomery, age sixteen—was being treated at an undisclosed location for an apparent drug overdose. The young actress was found in the hotel suite occupied by Marshall Whitmore, the openly gay actor who portrayed Miss Montgomery's father in her new Fox television series. Police are questioning Mr. Whitmore. No word yet on the condition of the actress.

"Why was she in Marshall Whitmore's hotel suite?" the news anchor asked.

"That's what the authorities want to know," the reporter replied.

"Will he be charged?"

"Police are unclear at this point." The reporter shook her head. "Let's pray Clarissa recovers from this terrible tragedy."

"What a crock," Jamie grumbled. "They don't know anything. He'd never hurt anybody. I hate the media. Did you notice they slipped in 'openly gay actor'? Like that has anything to do with this."

Ellie snapped off the TV. "We need to do something."

"I could call Norinne." Jamie dug out his cell phone. "She's a great agent. I'll bet she knows what's happening." A minute later, he handed the phone to Ellie. "She wants to talk to you."

Norrine gave Ellie a list of things to do. "Glad she's on his side." Ellie handed the phone back to Jamie.

"Has she talked to him?"

"Yes, he's okay. Really upset," Ellie replied. "The police let him go a little while ago. Clarissa will recover." Ellie looked down at the list. "I need to call Patti and Marshall's mother."

"Anything I can do?" Jamie asked.

"Not right now. Keep a good thought, okay?"

"Definitely. Are we on for tomorrow?" He stood and headed for the door. "Six miles, right?"

"You're killing me." Ellie followed him. "Ten-thirty?"

"Works for me." Jamie turned her around. "Your ass is looking really good."

Ellie threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "Marshall was nuts to let you get away."

Jamie slapped her butt playfully. "I can still be caught."

* * *

"Don't worry, Ellie. I'm on my way to Aunt Teresa's now," Patti said. "Mom and I will keep her under control. I know Marsh didn't have anything to do with that poor girl's problems."

"Thanks." Ellie paced the living room. "I wish I could do something else to help him."

"Just be there. He'll call you soon." Patti paused "Are you getting along better with the beast?"

"Beast? You mean Seth." Ellie laughed. "A little better, he stopped snarling every time he sees me. And he cooked breakfast for me last week."

"Progress! Have you seen him naked again?"

"Certainly not." Ellie felt heat flickering from deep inside.

"So how big was it?" Patti giggled. "C'mon, it's been a long time since I've seen a new one. I want details!"

"Honestly. We're not having this discussion." Ellie looked furtively around the room. "It's the biggest one I've ever seen, outside of porn. Actually, he could be in porn."

"No kidding! Does he have big hands?"

"Not especially. His hands are quite beautiful." Ellie closed her eyes. "Slim fingers, big palms. They look great when he's playing."

"Okay back to the interesting part. How long? How thick? Straight? Curved? Circumcised?"

"I didn't measure it." Ellie laughed. "I only saw it for a second or two." That was an outright lie. It had been at least fifteen seconds. Enough to watch it grow under her gaze. "It did seem to get bigger."

"And all you did was look?" Patti screeched. "Younger men are such a treat."

"I know. He might be a beast, but he's a gorgeous one." Ellie sighed. "Did I mention that his butt is perfect?"

"Why thank you." Seth stood in the doorway.

"Gotta go!" Ellie squeaked and hung up. She stood up to flee to her room. But Seth already stood in front of her. He grabbed her shoulders and leaned his head toward her.

"So I'm a beast?" Seth whispered against her neck.

"How much did you hear?" Ellie told herself to get away but her legs wouldn't work.

"Enough to know you liked what you saw." He drew her closer. "I have a perfect butt, hmm?"

"I meant that you're a perfect ass." Ellie wondered if he could hear her heart pounding.

"Don't be that way." His lips touched her cheek lightly. "I like what I see too, especially after you come in from a run."

"But I'm all sweaty and dirty."

"Exactly," Seth murmured "We could play Little Red Riding Hood. Guess who I'll be?"

"Not Grandma." The man was trying to seduce her. And she wasn't doing anything to stop him.

"The big bad wolf, of course." His breath was hot on her neck. "I could wait in your bed, ready to eat you all up."

"I never said you were a wolf, only a beast." Ellie pushed at him but he gripped her tighter.

"Grrr." He leaned in further. "I don't bite, unless you want me to." With that he kissed her neck and slowly dragged his tongue down to her collarbone. "Hmm, very tasty, maybe I do bite."

Ellie managed to pull herself away and make a break for her room. Seth's laughter followed her down the hall. She slammed her door and fell on the bed as her legs wouldn't hold her up anymore.

* * *

It was raining heavily when Marshall's plane landed in Newark. He pulled on a baseball cap and dark sunglasses. He walked off the plane quickly, scanning the crowd for reporters. A week since the disaster at the hotel and now he was home again, his career all but over.

He made it to baggage claim and found his driver. Traffic was light going into the city. Marshall got out at the service entrance to his building. He ran in unnoticed, sprinting through the downpour.

* * *

"I told you it would rain." Ellie threw Jamie's soaked and stinky running clothes in the washer. "I can't believe you made me finish."

"You didn't melt," Jamie observed. "Thanks for the shorts."

"Thank Seth. They were in the dryer." Ellie started the washer. "I have to change." She tossed him several old towels. "You dry off the dogs." He caught them deftly and crouched down. Ellie sighed as she watched him, another gorgeous unavailable man.

“What?” Jamie rubbed Sam’s wiggling body.

“You’re sure about being gay?” Ellie blurted.

Jamie laughed. “Yup, why? Am I getting to you?”

“A little. I think I’m finally starting to miss Charlie.”

“So call him.” Jamie turned his attention to Django.

“No, I only miss him because I miss the sex,” Ellie said. “He was pretty good. Not that I have any basis for comparison.”

“You mean he’s the only guy you’ve been with?”

“I met him when I was seventeen, we got married when I was twenty and CJ was born a year later. No time for anyone else.” Ellie saw the astonished look on Jamie’s face. “You probably think I’m weird.”

“Nope, not at all.” Jamie shook his head. “Your husband is a real jerk to throw that away.”

“Maybe it’s my fault?” Ellie said. “I must have bored him.”

“You are not boring,” Jamie stated firmly. “Now go change, I’ll make us some coffee.”

* * *

Marshall went in the back door to his apartment. It opened directly into the kitchen and he smelled brewing coffee.

For Marsh, it was fifteen years ago. Kit poured their coffee into two oversized mugs. His hair was damp from the shower, and his skin glowed. Marsh dropped his bag and smiled. “Hey, baby, I’m home.”

Kit turned around and held out his arms. Marsh held him close and breathed in the sweetness of his skin.

“I didn’t think you would be happy to see me,” Kit mumbled.

Marshall pulled back and blinked. It wasn’t Kit of course. He was gone, dead. “Not Kit.”

“Who is Kit?” the man asked.

Marshall pulled completely away and stared. "Jamie, of course. I'm a little beat," he said quickly.

His head spun. Kit was dead. Dead. Then he saw Ellie standing in the doorway, confusion on her face.

Marshall crossed to her and kissed her cheek. He hugged her awkwardly. Jamie got another cup from the cupboard.

"You okay?" Ellie studied him closely.

They had spoken on the phone. Production on the television show had closed down for the time being. He'd mentioned coming back to New York. Ellie looked happy to see him.

"Just exhausted." He bent to pet Django. The dog sat at his feet, tail swishing across the floor. Sammy was right next to him, a big doggy grin on his face. "Is Django on tranquilizers?"

"No, I've been teaching him some manners," Ellie replied.

"Wow, I'm impressed. Any progress with Seth? Is he housebroken yet?"

"Not quite, but he's improving." Ellie blushed.

"C'mon, let's have some coffee." Jamie gestured to the table.

"Good idea." Marshall picked up Sheba, who was curving around his feet. "She looks great, Ellie."

"She massages her every day." Jamie shook his head. "That is one lucky pussycat."

Marshall sat at the table and stared at Jamie. "Why are you here?"

Ellie tossed Jamie the T-shirt she had been holding. "We run just about every day. We got caught in the rain." She eyed Jamie. "No nipples at the table."

"Yes, Mom." Jamie donned the shirt and sat. "She is so bossy."

Ellie turned to Marshall. "You look exhausted. Can I make you something to eat?"

"Maybe later. Right now I just want a shower and my bed."

"Sounds good to me." Jamie grinned wickedly at Marshall.

"Alone." Marshall returned Jamie's smile for a moment. "But thanks for the offer. I'll tell you all about what happened later. Right now I can't think straight." Marshall patted Jamie's shoulder as he walked out of the kitchen.

"I still want to know who Kit is," Jamie called out.

Marshall froze in mid step, sick of lies and deceptions. What the hell. His life was a shambles anyway. Ellie deserved better. Jamie should hear the truth. He went back to the table and sat. "I don't know where to begin."

"You called me Kit when you came in. Is he someone from before?"

Marshall nodded slowly. "Yes, he was. My lover, my partner for five years. His name was Christopher William Miller. Everybody called him Kit. My soul mate."

He stopped when Ellie gasped. Her eyes were wide as a look of shock spread over her face.

Marshall stared at Jamie. "He was Ellie's big brother. He loved her like no one else." His hand reached out and touched Jamie's face "You resemble him, that's why I brought you home. That's why I hugged you when I came in. I'm so exhausted that I thought for a minute you were him. I'm sorry for using you." Marshall dropped his hand. "Very sorry."

"It wasn't me, it was never me that you were with. I was a substitute," Jamie stated. "For your dead lover, that's sick. It would have been better to be a fast piece of ass." He got up and grabbed his still wet sneakers. "I really liked you, Marsh. I didn't set out to hustle you. Guess I'm the one who was hustled." Jamie dropped a kiss on Ellie's cheek. "I'll call you." Ten seconds later, the door slammed.

"Why are you doing this?" Ellie asked. "Making up this lie about Kit."

Marshall turned to Ellie. "He never told you about us. He was afraid of losing his family. You all were so important to him." Marshall put his head in his hands. "But I had to have everything my way and it got him killed."

Ellie's hands gripped the edge of the table. She was shaking and her coffee sloshed over the rim. Kit would not have kept such a secret from

her. They had been close, despite the difference in age, despite living so far apart.

"I knew my brother was gay. What I don't understand is why it took you twelve years to tell me you were his lover."

"Wait a minute, you knew he was gay?" Marshall croaked.

"Of course I knew, I've always known." Ellie reached for her coffee cup. "I was eleven and came home from school early one day. Our parents were at work. Kit was home, his junk scattered everywhere and his bedroom door closed. I thought he was studying. I went to my room and that's when I heard."

"Heard what?"

"The sounds of lovemaking."

"At age eleven?" Marshall asked.

"Our house was small, sometimes I could hear our parents late in the night. I thought Kit had a girl in his room." Ellie shrugged. "It wasn't a girl. I didn't put it together until I was much older."

"Why didn't you ask him?" Marshall reached for her hand.

"I didn't think it any of my business." Ellie grabbed a tissue. "I worried about him, especially with AIDS. Then for a while I thought that I was mistaken, that he was just experimenting. He always had a girlfriend. What was I supposed to think?" Ellie blew her nose loudly. "Was I supposed to ask him if he was gay?"

"He was ashamed. But he trusted you. He was counting on you in fact," Marshall replied. "The weekend he died, he planned to tell you about us. I wanted his family to know he had a partner, someone to love him, take care of him. We were both tired of keeping secrets. His playing days were over. We wanted an honest life. We wanted you to be part of it."

Ellie's eyes grew wide. "He was going to tell Mom and Dad?"

"You first, to kind of test the water. He was freaking out a little, no, make that a lot. But he figured you would help him with your parents."

“He must have loved you.” Ellie sat back in the chair. “Kit called me right before he left, said he wanted to talk to me about something. That was the last time we spoke.” She wiped her eyes. “I need to take a walk.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, thanks. I want to be alone right now.” She stood carefully as if not sure her legs would hold up.

“Please don’t shut me out. I want to help you.”

“Really? I needed you when he died. If you wanted to be part of the family, you should have stepped up then.” She left the kitchen. A minute later the door slammed.

Chapter Twelve

Ellie knew I was gay? Go figure. Secrets, secrets and more secrets. All families have them. Ashamed? Of being gay? Maybe. The need to keep it a secret overwhelmed me at times. It was a way of life. I just can't help but wonder if things would be different if I had been honest with Ellie.

Rather than take the elevator, Ellie ran down the steps to the lobby. She hesitated in the doorway of the building. The rain had stopped but it was cloudy.

Without thinking, she turned toward the park and ran, head down. Her wet Adidas slapped the pavement and water squished between her toes. She flopped on the first empty park bench and realized it, too, was wet from the rain. Sweat poured off her, making her hair hot and sticky on the nape of her neck. She reached in the pocket of her shorts and found a scrunchy to get the hair out of her way.

She was furious with Kit for dying, with Marshall for not telling her about his relationship with her brother. Gutless wonders both of them. And she held the bag of emotional refuse they left behind. She'd supported and cared for her parents. Charlie had helped, but more with the practical matters. She'd called her father every day and listened to the tears in his voice when he insisted he had not been crying. She'd set up the scholarships in Kit's name. She'd watched her mother die by inches, finally fading away, leaving her. Worst of all, she mourned Kit alone. Her parents quickly got into deifying him. She remembered everything about him including his faults. She carried Kit's memory in her heart. How comforting it would have been to know someone else in the world had loved him.

Ellie's cell rang. She took it out and recognized Patti's number. "Hey."

"Are you okay? Marsh just called me."

"It hasn't been one of my better days. Did he tell you everything?" Ellie started to walk.

"Umm, yeah. His timing leaves a lot to be desired."

"Twelve years too late." Ellie walked faster. "I wonder if Kit would have come out. Maybe Marshall made the whole thing up."

"I don't think so. His whole apartment was a shrine to Kit. There were pictures of him everywhere."

Ellie stopped. "What did you just say?"

"That Marsh had pictures of Kit everywhere..." Patti's voice trailed off.

"You knew? All this time you knew? And you never said a word to me."

"Listen to me. I wanted to—" Ellie ended the call. She put the phone in her pocket and started to run.

* * *

Seth walked through the park with a spring in his step. He finally had a gig at a small club in midtown. Decent money and he would get to play with Ollie. There might be some studio work.

He would be playing for an up-and-coming jazz artist. She had signed a deal with a major label, CD to be released in November. The gig was to work on material for her upcoming tour. He hadn't met her yet, but Ollie was impressed. They would move from the club to the Blue Note, one of the biggest jazz and blues clubs in New York. He hoped to be a part of her tour, but they had Russell Malone lined up for that. But one gig led to another. He felt optimistic for the first time since arriving home. It had even stopped raining.

He passed a homeless person curled up in a ball on a park bench. He noticed red hair that looked like Ellie's and stopped.

"Hey, Ellie?" he called out.

The person raised their head. Ellie. She looked awful, her nose red, eyes puffy and hair plastered to her skull. Blood seeped from her leg.

"Did you get mugged?" He sat on the bench beside her and was immediately sorry as it was wet from the rain. "Did you know this bench was wet?" He pried her fingers loose from her knees, so he could figure out where the blood was coming from. Her fingers were icy.

"Go away," she choked out. "Leave me alone."

He ignored her. She had a nasty scrape on her left knee. It still bled, with dirt and grit embedded in the scrape. "This needs to be cleaned before it gets infected. Did you fall?" He wiped at her face with his T-shirt.

"I guess. I really don't remember." Ellie turned away from him.

"C'mon, let's go home and get this taken care of." Seth tried to help her to her feet.

"It's not my home," Ellie snapped. She wrapped her hands around her knees again. "Go away."

Seth rolled his eyes. Women were trouble. *Get out, get out now.* "Look, I can't leave you, so we'll just stay here until you're ready to figure out where to you want to go."

A while later, Ellie lifted her head. "Marshall is home."

"It'll be good to see him. How's he doing?"

"He's tired and stressed out." Ellie looked at her scraped knee. "It hurts."

"I'll bet." Seth tucked a damp curl behind her ear.

"Did you know that he and my brother were lovers?"

"The brother who taught you to love jazz?"

"He was a football player, a New York Jet. He played strong safety, went to the Pro Bowl twice."

"Was this recent?"

"My brother died twelve years ago," Ellie said. "His name was Kit Miller."

“Holy shit! You’re Kit’s sister?” Incredulous, Seth looked at her closely. “I should have seen the resemblance. That explains a lot.”

“You knew Kit?”

“Sure, he was a friend of my dad,” Seth explained. “He used to come to this jazz club my dad played at. Dad had a trio.” Ellie still had tears running down her face. “That’s it. I don’t know what you’re crying about, but you’re going to tell me. I have to fix up your knee.” He tugged at Ellie’s hand. “C’mon, I can’t carry you.”

An hour later, Ellie felt considerably better. She and Seth were seated in a little diner. Seth seemed to know everyone in the place. After cleaning up her knee with the diner’s first aid kit, he ordered them a traditional greasy breakfast even though it was lunchtime. Ellie ate with gusto, finally mopping up her plate with her last piece of toast.

“Those were the best hash browns I’ve ever eaten.” Ellie sighed and rubbed her stomach.

“I love this place. It hasn’t changed in twenty years. My dad used to bring me here, every Sunday.” He looked over at Ellie. “You ready to talk now?”

“Sure, if you tell me how well you knew Kit.”

* * *

Marshall paced the apartment waiting for Ellie to return. The dogs watched from the couch. Sammy whined softly and panted. Then Seth called and left a message that Ellie was with him. Relieved, Marshall went to the kitchen to get something to eat. And he saw the bottle of red wine sitting on the counter.

* * *

“You have had a bad day.” Seth signaled the waitress for more coffee. “So you never knew about Kit and Marshall.”

"Never had a clue. Even my best friend Patti knew, but she kept it from me. I feel like I've been living a bunch of lies."

"Well, your old man certainly lied to you," Seth replied. "I don't know about your friend but I do know Marshall. He never set out to deceive you."

"He could have told me sooner, like when Kit was killed."

"True, but maybe he was considering your parents," Seth said. "Do you really think that would have helped the situation?"

"No, I guess not. Daddy's whole life was wrapped up in his perfect son. It would have killed him." Ellie wasn't ready to give up her anger. "He still should have told me."

"Granted, but Kit's death messed up Marshall." Seth sipped his coffee. "I was only a kid but I remember that Dad worried about him. At first he went through men like crazy then he started drinking. He even dated women in California."

"I had no idea," Ellie said. "He mourned Kit all by himself."

"That's the trouble, he never mourned Kit. The apartment was full of pictures of him, like a shrine."

"Didn't you wonder where they'd gone, when you came home?"

"I thought maybe he took them to California, like when he did *Annie's Place*." Seth smiled at Ellie. "He's the best person I know. There's no better friend in the world."

"He lets you live at his place for free, doesn't he?"

"Since my dad died. We lost our apartment when he got sick." Seth shrugged. "I would have been on the street otherwise."

"Your dad and Kit were friends? How did that happen?"

"They were both jazz freaks, gay jazz freaks."

"Your dad was gay?"

"Yeah, he considered himself bisexual for a long time. Then he came out when I was thirteen."

"Did you know?"

“Well, the guys who slept over were a pretty good indication. It wasn’t that big a deal for me. He was a good father. I always came first. And when I was older all his female groupies gravitated to me.” He winked at Ellie. “That was a bonus.”

Ellie laughed. “I’ll bet.” She looked at her watch. “Sammy will be frantic.”

“You ready to go home?”

“Yeah, I need to apologize to Marshall.”

They walked out of the diner. Seth put his hand on the small of Ellie’s back to guide her. When they were on the street Ellie turned and kissed his cheek.

“Thanks,” she said.

He backed away.

Ellie smiled. “I need a shower, sorry.”

“No, you don’t.” Seth pulled her close and sniffed her. “You smell fine to me.”

He lingered over her neck, brushing his mouth along her jaw. Without thinking she pressed closer. She could feel the length of his body. He grabbed her butt and squeezed. “You feel nice and tight.”

Ellie sighed and put her arms around him. “What are we doing?”

“Testing the waters,” he murmured.

Seth kissed his way to her mouth. He pressed his lips to hers, gently, softly and kept them there, tasting her. Ellie’s eyes closed, she forgot that they were in the middle of the sidewalk, that she had a husband and that this guy was trouble. She kissed him back, opening her mouth, inviting him to taste more.

He held her tighter and traced his tongue over her lips before twining it around hers. He tasted of coffee and the peppermint the waitress had brought with the check. They took a breath, smiled at each other and kissed some more. She wanted to do a lot more than kiss this man and judging from what was pressing against her stomach, he wanted a lot

more too. She broke away from Seth and shook her head to clear it. Seth looked at her with a bemused expression.

"You're a terrific kisser," he said. "C'mon, kiss me again."

"We can't. This isn't a good idea." Ellie tried to shake off his arms. "I'm married and you're a horn dog."

"A what?" Seth burst out laughing.

"A horn dog. A guy who attempts to get any woman who's breathing into bed." Ellie finally pushed herself away. "I'm not cut out for casual sex. It's too important."

"I do not try to get every woman I meet into bed. It's been months since I..." Seth's voice trailed off. "I like you. A lot. More than Django does."

"Well, he's always trying to stick his nose in my crotch!"

"Smart dog." Seth held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, since making love is out, how about you come hear me play?"

"You got a job? That's great. I'd love to hear you play."

"You'd love making love with me, too." Seth kissed the tip of her nose and turned her toward home. Ellie walked, not seeing where she was going as images of naked Seth tripped through her mind.

Chapter Thirteen

Well, well, well. Seth hitting on Ellie. He's a horn dog all right. But he likes my sister, that's obvious. I remember the diner too, lots of late nights spent there with my friends including Seth's dad. Great food, good coffee. Seth may be just what Ellie needs.

Marshall let himself into the apartment. The dogs greeted him with a great deal of enthusiasm. He felt better, more centered. The meeting had helped a lot. Seth came out of the kitchen and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Glad to see you." Seth hugged him for a moment. "Sorry about your show."

"Good to see you, too. I didn't think I'd be home so soon," Marshall said. "Is Ellie here?"

"Yeah, in the shower." Seth looked at him closely. "Were you at a meeting? I saw the empty wine bottle."

"I dumped it, then I went to a meeting."

"We stopped at Zabar's on the way home. Got some of that salami you like. C'mon, I'll make you a sandwich." Seth led him to the kitchen.

They were halfway through their sandwiches when Ellie walked in. She looked pale, her damp hair tucked behind her ears. Marshall put his sandwich down and stood. Ellie stared at him with a half-smile on her face.

"Tell me how you met?" Ellie moved into the kitchen. "I want to hear all about it."

Marshall took the two steps to Ellie and engulfed her in a hug. "Kit was right about you, Ellie-Belly. You are the best."

"I'm sorry about before. I reacted badly." Ellie kissed his cheek. "Can you forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive. I blindsided you. And I realize I should have told you a long time ago. I'm sorry about that." Marshall hugged her again.

Seth rose from the table. "I'll just leave you two lovebirds alone." He picked up the remains of his sandwich and took off. "Have fun." His voice echoed down the hallway.

Ellie and Marshall sat at the table. "How did you meet?" Ellie asked again.

"You introduced us, don't you remember? At Patti's wedding."

Ellie emerged from the ladies room, a damp paper towel in her hand. Patti clutched her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, I didn't think morning sickness lasted all day."

Patti looked around the crowded ballroom. "Where's Joe?"

"His mother dragged him off. Let's get a drink."

Patti tugged at her dress. "I can't wait to get out of this thing. It's too tight."

Ellie looked at her friend. The wedding gown was a pouffy affair of lace and tiers with beading. The gown looked great in a bridal magazine but didn't translate well to an all-day, all-night wedding celebration.

"We're done taking pictures at least." Ellie linked arms with her friend. "Let's get some ginger ale. It'll help settle my stomach."

"I want a beer," Patti grumbled. "And I can't have one, all because of you."

"Me? I didn't knock you up, Joe did." Ellie laughed. "Our kids will be best friends."

"No kidding, but you and Charlie inspired us." Patti shoved the men standing at the bar out of the way, using her dress like a snowplow. "Bride coming through!"

"Hey, beautiful." Kit stood with his back to the bar. He grabbed Patti and kissed her thoroughly, dipping her dramatically in the process. Ellie rolled her eyes and waited for them to come up for air.

Patti emerged from Kit's embrace. "I wish you had done that before Joe got me in trouble."

"You're pregnant?" Kit hollered.

"Shh, you want everyone to know?" Patti punched his arm.

Kit roared. "You and Ellie do everything together!"

"I had something to do with it." Joe wrapped his arms around his bride. He grinned. "Let's dance, baby." He led a still giggling Patti to the dance floor.

Kit took his sister's ginger ale and his beer. "C'mon, we need to find you a chair." He led them to an empty table. "You doing okay?"

"Sure, just tired." She sipped her drink. "How about you? I know you didn't want to be traded."

"The Chiefs are a good organization. But I'll do fine with the Jets."

"At least you'll be closer to home. Daddy's excited about going to all your home games."

"I want you and Charlie to come too," Kit said. "As soon as I find a place."

"Have you been looking?"

"No time. Don't worry, I'll find something." Kit lowered his voice. "Do you guys need money?"

"We're okay. I'm working, remember, and Charlie's got a part-time job." Ellie looked around the crowded room for Charlie. Instead she spotted a tall blond-haired man at the edge of the dance floor.

"Hey, there's Marshall. He lives in New York." She stood and tugged her brother to his feet. "C'mon, I'll introduce you."

"Who's Marshall?" Kit asked.

"Patti's cousin. He's a big deal Broadway actor." Ellie pointed and waved at Marshall, who was now looking their way.

"I brought him to you." Ellie smiled. "I forgot."

"Yup, the love of my life, introduced to me by a pregnant girl in an ugly bridesmaid's dress."

"It was an awful dress. Patti's mom picked it out. Charlie wore it for Halloween the next year." Ellie rolled her eyes. "He looked better in it than I did. You were so handsome that night. So did you start dating right away?"

"The gay equivalent of dating." Marshall grinned at Ellie.

Ellie colored. "I've seen *Queer as Folk*."

"Not quite like that. Nobody has that much sex." Marshall stood. "C'mon, I want to show you some pictures."

"Smile, Kit," Marsh called. Kit lifted his ski goggles and grinned as Marshall snapped away. When Marshall finished, Kit put his goggles down.

"Come with me," Kit urged.

"No way. No black diamond trails for me." Marshall shook his head. "I'll do a blue trail with you."

"Boring, but maybe later."

"Does the team know you're doing this?"

"They know I ski and besides, training camp is months away." Kit looked around and drew Marshall close. "C'mon, baby, we can see what develops at the top."

"It's way too cold for that." Marshall laughed. "Tell you what, I'll go into town and get some wine. I'll meet you in the hot tub in a couple of hours."

"You got it." Kit dropped a quick kiss on Marshall's mouth and headed to the chair lift.

Later when Marshall let himself into the rented chalet, he heard noise from the deck. He found Kit in the hot tub, with two very blond young men. Kit raised his beer bottle to Marshall.

“Hey look what I found on the trail.” He gestured to the two blonds. “Meet Eric and Bjorn, just got in from Stockholm. Don’t speak a word of English, but I think we’re communicating well.”

With that said, one of the blonds moved toward Kit and ducked his head under the water. Kit smiled at Marshall. “C’mon in, baby, the water is fine.”

“No, thanks.” Marshall walked back into the chalet. He took the next flight home.

Ellie and Marshall were stretched out on Marshall’s bed. A trunk was opened at the foot of the bed. Pictures were scattered everywhere. Ellie put down the one of Kit at the ski resort. She turned to Marshall who had his eyes closed.

“He looked happy,” she said.

“He was.” Marshall smiled. “Skiing was an acceptable vacation for two men to take together. Especially when you spend a lot of time in the bars pretending to be interested in women.”

“All that pretending, it must have been exhausting.”

Marshall shrugged. “It was a way of life for him and therefore for me. But it did get old.”

Sheba jumped on the bed and curled up between them after making a great show of purring and kneading the mattress.

“Kit gave you Sheba, didn’t he?” Ellie stroked the cat.

“She was a make-up present,” Marshall replied. “After the Swedish hot tub incident, I broke up with him. The breakup lasted about a week. He brought me this tiny kitten. I took him back.”

“My brother didn’t love you the way you deserve to be loved.” Ellie touched Marshall’s face.

“And how is that?” He opened his eyes and smiled wearily at her.

“With his whole heart, with respect and affection, fidelity, like a man should love his partner.” Ellie blinked back tears. “With everything he had.”

"He did his best, I know that." Marshall sighed. "He had a lot of temptations. It wasn't a picnic for him."

"He didn't make it easy for you, did he?" Ellie put a pillow behind her back. "I loved my brother, but sometimes he could be a self-centered, egomaniacal prick."

Marshall laughed. "He was a bastard at times, but love isn't usually an equal thing, is it?" He started to pick up the pictures. His fingers traced Kit's face. "I'd take him back any day, warts and all."

"He's gone, honey. You need to let him go."

Marshall grabbed a pillow and curled around it. "Good idea. Why didn't I think of that?"

Ellie smacked his shoulder. "Cut it out." She yanked the pillow away from him. "You look exhausted."

"A week with almost no sleep and hours of baring your soul will do that to a guy." He grabbed the pillow back and snuggled.

"C'mon, stand up. Let's get those pants off." Ellie pulled him to his feet.

"Why are you taking off my clothes?" Marshall asked. "I like you but women don't turn me on. I guess we could give it a try."

"I'm putting you to bed." Ellie struggled with his shoes.

"Okay, but I need a nap first." Marshall sat on the edge of the bed, pants around his ankles.

"To sleep." She urged him under the covers. After he was tucked in, she kissed him on the forehead. "Sweet dreams."

"Oh, aren't you climbing in here with me?"

"No, you need rest." She bent down and whispered. "You're too sexy. If I crawled in there, I'd definitely want to have my way with you."

"I've still got it." He closed his eyes. "Women can't resist me."

"You are irresistible." She smoothed his hair and kissed him again. "See you later."

Seth came out of his room as she closed Marshall's door. "You girls work everything out?"

"We're getting there." Ellie eyed him. "Shouldn't you be practicing?"

"On my way now." He indicated the guitar case in his hand. "You want to come?"

"I'd love to, but I should take the dogs out first."

"We can bring them if you want."

"They allow dogs?" Ellie was surprised.

"At rehearsals. This place isn't exactly exclusive." He bent down to ruffle Django's ears. "These guys are several classes above the usual clientele."

"Sounds great. Let me get my purse."

* * *

The club was a hole in the wall, but it did have atmosphere, if you happened to like cigarette smoke and rancid grease overlaid with a hint of stale beer.

Ellie watched the combo rehearse. The group consisted of three musicians plus Seth on guitar. Seth introduced her to a strange-looking man with wispy blond hair named Ollie. Ollie alternated between base and saxophone. Seth mesmerized her. His intensity and love for the music came through in every note. He played much better than any of the other guys and they let him take the lead.

Ellie noticed a girl at the back of the club who looked to be in her mid-twenties. She smiled at Ellie. "May I join you?" the girl asked.

The dogs wagged their tails and Sammy made a great show of waving his paws at her.

Ellie patted the chair next to her.

The girl sat. "I'm Jennie."

"Ellie. It's nice to meet you."

"Your dogs are great." Jennie reached down and patted them. "So well-behaved."

"Most of the time." Ellie took a close look. Jennie had skin the color of café-au-lait, eyes an unusual shade of amber and curly, long hair with gold highlights. Her hands were small and slender. Breathtaking, even clad in jeans and a loose T-shirt. She smiled at Ellie again and showed even white teeth. She motioned to the group on the stage.

"The guitar player is putting the rest of them to shame."

"I enjoy listening to all of them. But they need to rehearse a bit more. Tighten thing up a little."

"I agree, but things will come together fine," Jennie said. "Well I should introduce myself to the new guitar man." She rose from the table and went to the tiny stage. The group stopped playing and the musicians grouped around her.

Ellie realized Jennie must be the up-and-coming jazz artist Seth had told her about. A minute later, Seth and Jennie put their heads together over some sheet music. After a few minutes, Jennie laughed and turned a thousand-watt smile on Seth as she grabbed his arm. Ellie's stomach lurched as Seth returned her smile.

As her cheeks grew hot, she looked down at the table. What was the matter with her? Naturally Seth would smile at a beauty like Jennie. Ellie sipped her water and took a deep breath.

After a few more minutes of consultation with the other musicians and a sound check, they launched into a lively rendition of "East of the Sun". Ellie's foot started tapping.

An hour later, Ellie rose to her feet clapping and whistling. Jennie's voice flowed through the room like warm honey. This very young woman evoked images of Judy Garland, Billie Holliday and even the remarkable Sarah Vaughan. But there was some thing else in her voice, an element of youth and joy.

Even the dogs woke from their snooze on the floor and became alert. The dogs joined in, barking and capering at her feet. She shushed them, but Jennie laughed.

"I think I have some fans." She came down off the stage and petted the dogs. "You guys are so good!" She looked up at Ellie. "Thanks for listening."

"It was my pleasure," Ellie said warmly. "You have the voice of an angel."

"I need to work on my phrasing. We need to rehearse some."

"You'll be great," Ellie assured her. "Everyone'll fall in love with you."

"Are you coming to our opening?" Jennie asked. "It would be nice to see a friendly face."

"I'm planning on it. But these two will have to stay home." Ellie looked at her watch. "In fact, I better get going. It's almost time for their dinner."

"Too bad, they have great faces." Jennie stood and held out her hand. "Thanks for sticking around."

Ellie shook her hand. "Thanks for letting me listen." She tugged on the dog's leashes and waved at the musicians as she left the club.

"So?" Seth joined Ellie on the sidewalk in front of the club. "What did you think?"

"She's great, you're great. I'm not so sure about the others," Ellie said. The dogs sat at her feet. "These guys liked you too."

"They have good taste." He crouched next the dogs and rubbed their bellies. "She did most of the arrangements herself."

"She'll go far. I like that she doesn't do a lot of vocal acrobatics. She's almost a throwback really." Ellie smiled as she patted his shoulder. "You sounded really good. Like you."

"And what do I sound like?"

"Like you're doing something you love and have passion for, like you and the guitar are one" She took his hand. "Your fingers are amazing." She rubbed the callous on his thumb lightly. "You'll be terrific."

"So you'll see us play?" Seth asked. She still held his hand.

"Sure, Jennie asked me too. I'd love it."

"Marshall will want to come along."

"It's a deal," Ellie's brow furrowed. "You start next week, right?"

"Thursday," Seth confirmed. "Do we need that much practice?"

"No, it's just that I'm going out tomorrow night and I didn't want to miss your opening."

"Hot date?"

"Jamie is taking me salsa dancing."

"You salsa dance?" Seth asked. "You learned this in Buffalo?"

"Sure, Patti and I took a course at the high school last winter." Ellie sniffed. "I'm good at it."

"Thought you guys only did the Chicken Dance and the polka."

"We do, at weddings mostly. The Macarena too." Ellie let go of his hand. "Back to work. Jennie wants to work on her phrasing."

"How about a good luck kiss?" Seth grinned at her wickedly.

"You don't need luck." Ellie tugged on the dog's leashes and set off down the sidewalk.

As she walked home, Ellie imagined Jennie and Seth bent over the music, heads close. They were laughing, maybe arguing. Seth would tuck a strand of Jennie's hair behind her ear and they would lean toward each other, lips inches apart. Then Jennie would—"Woof."

Ellie opened her eyes. She had stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. The dogs sat next to her, heads cocked to one side, staring up at her. "Woof," barked Django. Sammy sat on his haunches and waved at her.

"Sorry, guys." She shook her head. If Seth became interested in Jennie, that would stop him from bothering her. It would be a good thing. She tried to convince herself all the way home.

Chapter Fourteen

Marshall, my Marshall. Ellie is right, I was a self-centered son of a bitch. I hurt the two people I loved most in the world. I knew it and did it anyway. Maybe that's why I can't move on.

Ellie looked at herself in the three-way mirror. She worried her thighs would seem huge in the little red dress she'd purchased on impulse that morning. The sales lady told her it was perfect for salsa dancing. The top made the most of Ellie's modest cleavage and showed off the smooth skin of her back. Slit almost to the waist, the skirt came to mid-thigh. She wore a tiny pair of red tap pants underneath. The dress made her legs look endless. The dancing shoes had three-inch heels that put her at just under six feet. Good thing Jamie was tall. She took a deep breath, gave her curls a final finger-combing and headed for the living room.

Jamie stood as she entered. He wore a black silk shirt and tight black pants. His red hair was slicked back and he smelled of woodsy citrus. "Wow." He twirled Ellie around and whistled. "You almost make me wish I were straight."

"You look pretty hot yourself." Ellie patted his cheek. "I hope this helps you get the part." Jamie was auditioning for a role in an off-Broadway play with a dance scene in a salsa club.

"I need all the practice I can get," Jamie replied. "We'll have good time. Did I tell you that my instructor will be there? He is too gorgeous."

While Jamie and Ellie were in the hallway, Marshall and Seth entered from the kitchen. Carrying large sandwiches and a bag of chips, they stopped and stared.

"Part of your dress seems to be missing," Seth said.

"Hey, Jamie, it's good to see you again." Marshall set his sandwich down. He touched the lapel of Jamie's shirt. "Nice. Barney's?"

"Their one-day sale." Jamie nodded. He gave Marshall a slow grin. "Enjoy your evening." He wrapped his arm around Ellie and opened the door.

"Don't wait up." Ellie snickered as the door shut.

Marshall and Seth stared at the closed door. "You're sure he's gay?" Seth asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Wonder if his salsa instructor is?"

"She seems to be enjoying New York." Seth looked at his sandwich. "You know, I'm not hungry anymore."

"What's up with you? You're always hungry."

"Nothing, I'm going out for a walk. You know, to clear my head." He took his sandwich back to the kitchen.

By the time Seth made it to the street, Marshall had the doorman hail a cab.

"Where are you going?" Seth asked.

"Back to Mambo. It's in the Latin Quarter on Lexington." Marshall opened the cab door.

"Oh, maybe I'll go with you." Seth followed him into the cab. "That's where they went, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'll look out for Ellie," Marshall said. "Jamie might take off with somebody and leave her."

"She's a small town girl. A big club might be too much." Seth nodded wisely. "She needs us."

* * *

Ellie looked around the club's big, rectangular dance floor. The DJ played classic salsa. Jamie led her to a large table. He pointed out a very handsome Latin man.

"That's Sergio, my instructor."

"Who are all the other people?" The table was crowded.

"Some of his students, I guess." Jamie led her to the group. "Let's say hello."

A flurry of introductions followed and Ellie found herself being led to the floor by Sergio. They put their hands together and started to dance. Sergio was marvelous, strong and sure. He stood a good five inches shorter than Ellie, but it didn't matter as they moved to the beat. The floor was smooth and fast. Ellie enjoyed every minute of it.

After three dances, Sergio took her hand and kissed it. "*Gracias*, you are a pleasure to salsa with. Now you can partner with young Jamie."

"This was a test?" Ellie laughed.

"The first dance. The last two were for my pleasure. Jamie needs to practice with a skilled partner and you are skilled." Sergio patted her hips. "Perhaps you will come to my studio for lessons. You could learn much from me."

"That would be fun," Ellie replied. As they walked to the table, Ellie was glad she had stepped up her running. Her endurance had improved.

"Have some water." Jamie handed her a bottle of Evian. "You looked great. You can move."

Ellie took a long pull and handed it back to Jamie. "I know I can dance. The question is, can you?" She threw her arm over his shoulder and wrapped her leg around his hip. "Show me what you've got."

Jamie wasn't great but he wasn't bad. He did have a surprising amount of rhythm though it seemed to skip his hips.

After two dances, Ellie grabbed his ass and shouted above the music, "Loosen up. Put some grease in here." She demonstrated by bringing her hips to his and using her hands to move his hips. "That's it," she cried as

he took over. They stood, moving only their bodies for a few minutes, then Jamie started moving his feet and they were off.

Seth and Marshall pushed their way through the crowd to the edge of the dance floor. They looked around for Ellie and Jamie. Marshall spotted them and pointed them out to Seth. Their bright red heads made them stand out in the crowd. As the couples moved, Seth caught glimpses of Ellie's milky white thighs playing peek-a-boo with that ridiculous excuse for a dress. Then he noticed Jamie's hands firmly gripped her sweet little bottom. And worse, Ellie hung on to his ass for dear life. Their hips moved together like a well-oiled machine.

"I had no idea Ellie danced so well," Marshall shouted in Seth's ear. "They look amazing together."

Just then the song ended and Jamie dipped Ellie back, her long white arm arched over her head as one shapely leg wrapped itself around Jamie's hip. Jamie ran his lips down Ellie's neck, over her chest and stopped at her waist. Seth's hands clenched. Jamie righted Ellie and caressed the leg still wrapped around his hip.

"What's the matter?" Marshall shook Seth's arm. "You look like you're ready to explode."

"It's hot in here," Seth said through clenched teeth. Jesus, Jamie still had his hand on Ellie's ass. Seth wanted to punch him out, gay or not. He was hot and hard. All he wanted to do was throw Ellie over his shoulder and get her out of here. Get her alone, rip that dress off and see what lay underneath. He shook his head to clear it and took a deep breath.

As they returned to the table, Ellie saw Marshall at the edge of the dance floor. She pointed him out to Jamie. "I think he came to see you." Then she noticed Seth behind Marshall. "Do you think they're checking up on us?"

"Looks like it. Seth seems quite smitten." Jamie steered her toward the two men. "This could be our lucky night."

"Maybe for you. I've been talking you up to Marshall." Ellie clutched Jamie's arm. "He really likes you."

"He doesn't even know me," Jamie shot back.

Ellie whispered in his ear. "He could get to know you."

"What's up?" Ellie asked. They stopped in front of Marshall and Seth.

"We wanted to get out of the apartment, get a drink." Marshall held up a bottle of water.

"I love Latin music," Seth added.

"But it's not live," Ellie protested. She pointed to the DJ. "I thought you'd prefer live music?"

"Did you see us dance?" Jamie put his arm around Ellie. "Ellie is a terrific partner." He placed his hands on her hips. "She really moves these."

Ellie wiggled her hips. "I need to find the ladies room. Get me some water, Jamie?"

"Sure, I'll meet you back here." Jamie kissed Ellie's cheek.

When Ellie left the ladies room a few minutes later, Seth was standing outside the door with a bottle of water in his hand.

"Thanks." Ellie took the water. "Where is everybody?"

"They seemed to have a lot to say to each other, so I left them alone." Seth pointed to a dark corner where Ellie could barely see her friends. They were huddled together, heads close.

"It looks like I've been dumped," Ellie said with a smile.

They made their way to the edge of the dance floor. Ellie sipped her water and looked around. The club was getting very crowded. A tall man with dark hair appeared at Ellie's side and asked her to dance.

"My wife is taking a break right now." Seth drew Ellie to his side. "Thanks for asking."

The man held up his hands and moved away.

"Wife," Ellie sputtered. She shook off Seth's arm. "I don't need a chaperone."

"He's a creep and that dress of yours is bound to give him the wrong idea." Seth drew her close again. "It's giving me a lot of ideas." His fingers brushed her thighs.

"It's the perfect dress for salsa." Ellie pushed his hands away.

"So let's dance." Seth held out his arms.

"You can dance?" Ellie looked at him uncertainly.

"I was raised by a gay Hispanic musician who hung out with drag queens." He looked her up and down. "You may not be able to keep up with me."

"I bet I can." Ellie put her empty bottle on a table and grabbed his hands. "Ready?"

Dancing with Seth was very different than dancing with Jamie or even Sergio. It was sexual, very physical, with Seth completely in command. After a minor test of wills, Ellie gave in and let Seth take charge. His body was strong and fluid and he stared into her eyes as they moved to the frenetic beat. Ellie had the time of her life. After two energetic mambos, the DJ slowed the tempo down to a samba. Seth pulled Ellie close.

"Maybe we should sit this one out," Ellie whispered.

"Not a chance. This is the most sensual music there is." He dipped Ellie.

Ellie sighed and let Seth take over again. She remembered the dance classes she and Patti took together because their husbands were too busy. She tried to show Charlie the steps but he never seemed able to spare the time. She wanted to call Patti and describe the club and how much fun she was having.

She was startled out of her daydream when Seth kissed her neck, sending a shiver right down to her toes. She pushed away from him.

"You have to stop this." Ellie fought to catch her breath. "I like you, but we can't be lovers. I'm married."

Without a word, he led her off the dance floor to a dark corner. He pressed her against the wall and braced his hands on either side of her.

"If you were my wife, I would come after you wherever you tried to hide. I'd take you home and do whatever it took to make you want to stay." He lowered his eyes and looked at her body. "And I'd take you dancing so other men could see how lucky I was, but then I'd have to take you home early because I'd need to make love to you." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "But that's just me." He started to back off.

"One more thing." He lowered his mouth and kissed her deeply, passionately, using his lips and tongue to excite her. He broke away leaving Ellie's head spinning. "I'd kiss you like that every day, so it's clear where you belong." With that he grabbed her hand and marched her over to the table where Jamie and Marshall sat.

"See that Ellie gets home safely," Seth said to the two men.

"Where are you going?" Marshall asked.

Seth smiled. "First, I'm downing several tequila shooters. Then I'll latch on to one of the lovely ladies here and see if she'll let me fuck her brains out."

"Sounds like a plan," Ellie mumbled as Jamie pulled out a chair for her and guided her into it.

"See you all later." Seth saluted and headed in the direction of a group of young women who crowded the bar.

"What was that all about?" Marshall looked closely at Ellie. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She managed a smile. "Jamie, can we go home? I've had enough dancing for one night."

The men each took one of Ellie's arms.

"I can take Ellie home," Marshall said. "C'mon, Ellie."

"I always make sure my dates get home safely," Jamie countered.

For a minute, it looked like a pissing contest. Ellie shook them off. "For God's sake we can all go."

Ellie walked out of the club.

Chapter Fifteen

Good point, Seth. I always went after Marshall, even when I seriously fucked up. Lazy, Charlie always was lazy. My sister was a sure thing for him. He never had to make an effort. Ellie did all the work.

The next morning Marshall woke to the smell of cinnamon. He was spooning Jamie who was curled on his side, sound asleep.

Last night Ellie went straight to her room after Jamie offered to take the dogs out. Marshall tagged along. They were halfway around the block when it started to pour. They sprinted back the apartment but got soaked anyway. After they toweled off the dogs and put them in Ellie's room, Marshall offered Jamie a change of clothes.

Jamie followed him to his bedroom, stripping off his shirt on the way. Marshall was rifling through his dresser when he felt Jamie's warm breath on his neck. Marshall gave into sweet temptation. Jamie's body was a work of art, from his broad shoulders to the fine dusting of red curls on his chest to his strong muscular thighs. Later when Jamie offered to go home, Marshall asked him to stay.

Marshall dropped a kiss on Jamie's neck, pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, and shuffled out to the kitchen. Ellie was taking a pan out of his oven. She turned it over on a plate and what looked to be cinnamon rolls popped out.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"I got up early and decided I wanted my grandma's sticky buns for breakfast."

"You made these from scratch?" He looked around the kitchen. "I don't even have flour."

"I stocked up on some basics when I got here. I find kneading dough therapeutic."

"I see." He nodded. "They look great."

"They need to cool. I'm taking the dogs for a run." She pointed to the refrigerator. "There's a quiche in there, ready for the oven. Give it a half an hour and put it in the oven. It'll be ready when I get back." She smiled at him slyly. "Unless you'd rather have romantic breakfast with Jamie?"

"Explain last night to me." He took her hand. "Did Seth do something or get out of line?"

"Look, I need to run," she replied, eyes downcast. She took the dog's leashes from the hook on the wall.

"I'll get it out of Seth," Marshall threatened.

"You'll have to find him first. He didn't come home last night." Ellie hooked up the dogs. "See you in a bit."

Marshall checked Seth's room. Empty. Marshall was on his second cup of coffee when Jamie ambled into the kitchen.

"What smells so good?"

"Ellie made sticky buns and there's a quiche in the oven." Marshall got up and poured Jamie some coffee.

"I'll be heading out." Jamie shook his head at the coffee.

"Please stay." Marshall put his arms around him. "I want you to stay."

"Because I remind you of your old boyfriend?" Jamie pulled away. "I was weak last night, but I don't want to be a trip down memory lane for you."

Marshall pulled him back. "Stop it. I like you, Jamie, and not because you resemble Kit." Marshall kissed him lightly. "You're a decent guy and you've been really great to Ellie." Marshall nibbled his neck. "And you're a fantastic lover." He pushed him into a chair. "I do think

you could do a lot better than me, however. But I'd like to get to know you. If that's what you want?"

Jamie nodded and looked down at his coffee cup. "I'd like that, I really would."

"I'm a recovering alcoholic." Marshall sat at the table. "I've been sober for nine years and seven months."

"That's a long time."

"There isn't a day goes by that I don't want a drink. Not one."

"So you're strong. That's not a fault."

"I'm not strong. Sometimes I need two or three meetings just to get to dinner." He paused. "That's not all. I'm forty-one and I'm pretty certain my career is over."

"You also snore, loudly. If you're trying to scare me, it isn't working. I don't care about any of that." Jamie grasped Marshall's hand. "You're still you."

"How old are you?" Marshall asked. "You look about twenty-two."

"I'm thirty-one. My biggest weakness is food, and sales at Barney's." He touched Marshall's face. "And you. I fell for you the first time I saw you at rehearsal."

"You're too much." Marshall kissed Jamie's palm. "What about your family?"

"They live in Queens. My dad is a captain in the NYPD and my mom teaches high school chemistry. I have an older brother, also a cop, and a younger sister in med school." He paused. "They're okay with me being gay. I want them to meet you."

"Today?" Marshall asked.

"Right after I get my stuff. You can empty a couple of drawers for me and I'll only need about half your closet." Jamie sipped his coffee. "Then we can go over to my parents for dinner." He snapped his fingers. "Remind me to pick up some change of address forms at the post office."

Marshall gripped his coffee cup, and took a deep breath. "Look, I really like you but—" He stopped when he saw the wicked glint in Jamie's eyes. A mischief-maker. "Nice. I almost believed you."

"Let's give it a couple of weeks."

"That quiche smells great." Marshall took it out of the oven. "Ellie should be back soon."

Just then they heard the door open and the scrabble of the dogs' toenails on the floor. "I think there's something between her and Seth," Marshall whispered.

"Yeah. He's got it bad for her."

* * *

"It's nothing. I'm just handy is all." Ellie picked up another sticky bun. They had demolished the quiche and most of the buns while she told them about Seth. She almost tried to save some quiche for him then stopped herself. He could fend for himself.

"I'm sure once he finds someone else, he'll leave me alone." She picked the bun apart.

"I don't think so," Jamie replied. "He's hung up on you."

"No way."

"Why do you find it so hard to believe that he's stuck on you?" Jamie asked. "If I were straight, I'd be all over you."

"Because he's gorgeous and talented. Have you checked him out?" Ellie chewed a small piece of roll.

"He is hot. His ass is to die for."

"You should see it naked and what's up front is pretty amazing too." Ellie raised her head. "Oh shit, was I speaking out loud just now?"

"When exactly did you see him naked?" Marshall tried not to laugh.

"Did you peek at him in the shower?" Jamie leered.

Elli laughed. "No, it was an accident. He didn't know anyone was here when he came home. He was in the kitchen, apparently he had just

gotten out of the shower, and I walked in on him.” She smiled. “Sammy was quite impressed.”

“Were you impressed?” Jamie asked.

“I’m old enough to be his big sister,” Ellie said. “He could have any woman he wants.”

“Exactly.” Jamie grabbed the uncrumbled part of the roll out of her hands and stuffed it in his mouth. “Too good to waste.” He chewed and swallowed. “He hasn’t brought any girls home, has he? Or stayed out all night? I mean aside from last night.”

“It’s not my job to keep track of him.” Ellie started to clear the table.

“You know, there haven’t been any messages from girls since I’ve been home,” Marshall volunteered.

“You’ve been home three days,” Elli pointed out.

“True, but I do think Seth raises a good point.” Marshall made another pot of coffee.

“What, that he wants to get laid?” Ellie opened the dishwasher.

Marshall shook his head. “Why hasn’t Charlie come after you?”

Ellie dropped the fork she was holding. “He doesn’t know where I am.”

“You think he wouldn’t be able to get it out of CJ, or Patti for that matter?”

“He’s giving me time. I wanted to be left alone,” Ellie stammered.

“Bullshit, if he wanted to save his marriage, he’d be here by now.” Marshall sat at the table. “Every time Kit screwed up and I left, he came after me.”

“It doesn’t seem that you miss Charlie all that much, either,” Jamie added. “You hardly talk about him. But you’ve told me all about CJ and Patti.”

Ellie sat down hard on her chair, all thoughts of cleaning up gone. Did she miss Charlie? When was the last time they had done anything fun together? They both worked hard, weekends were taken up with his hunting cabin and her household chores. He had promised to take her

dancing when she and Patti finished their course. It never happened. He had broken a lot of promises, like her going to vet school. Twenty years. She had twenty years invested with this guy and it came to nothing.

She'd had more fun with Jamie and Marshall in just a couple of days than she'd had with Charlie in months.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't think I miss him at all," she gulped. "I miss my son and Patti, even my boring job sometimes and my house. But Charlie, it's like he's already been gone for a while. He was around so little. He didn't have much impact on my life." She wiped her eyes with a paper napkin.

"You must notice some difference?" Marshall said.

"Yeah, I don't have nearly as much laundry and I can make the coffee stronger." She wiped her nose. "Isn't that sad?" She looked at her two friends. "I thought I had a good marriage, but apparently I didn't have one at all."

She stood and walked out of the kitchen with the dogs close on her heels.

* * *

Two hours later, Ellie emerged from her bedroom. She dropped a small bag by the door. Marshall and Jamie were in the living room messing around on the piano. There was still no sign of Seth.

"Marshall, I have to go back to Buffalo." Her face was pale, but her expression was determined.

"You're not taking much," Marshall said. "Are you coming back?"

"If you'll let me. I promised to go to Seth's opening and I love it here so much, but since you're home..." She paused to take a breath. "I'll pack up the rest of my stuff." She headed to her bedroom.

"Wait a minute." Marshall followed her. "I want you to come back. Hell, you can live here forever if that's what you want. CJ too."

"Really? That's so sweet but I have to go home at the end of the summer to be with my boy."

"Sure, of course. So are you seeing Charlie?" Marshall asked.

"Yes, I don't think I should ask for a divorce over the phone." Ellie smiled ruefully.

"Okay, I'm tagging along," Marshall said. "We flying? Driving? Taking the train?"

She pointed to Sammy. "I won't put him in cargo, so I rented a car." She looked at Marshall. "You don't have to go with me. I can handle it."

"I want to. It's not like I have a job or anything." He patted Sammy. "I can see Patti, maybe call my mother, you know, be your support group." He stopped. "Like Kit would have been."

"Thanks." Ellie hugged him hard. "What about Sheba and Django?"

"I'll take care of them." Jamie stood in the doorway. "I'll even do Sheba's kitty massages."

Marshall nodded. "Give me twenty minutes to pack."

* * *

Seth let himself into the apartment and found it blessedly empty. No dogs, no people, just quiet. What a relief. His head was pounding and he'd spent twenty bucks he didn't have on a cab ride home.

His back hurt from sleeping on Ollie's lumpy couch. He wasn't quite sure how he ended up there, only that he'd pounded on Ollie's door until it opened. He vaguely remembered Ollie holding his head over the toilet while he lost all the tequila he drank. When he finished, he lay on the cool tiles of the bathroom floor until Ollie dumped him on the couch.

He took a shower and four aspirin and felt marginally better. Where was everybody? The front door opened. Seth prepared to grovel to Ellie. He had no idea why this woman got to him. She was older, he didn't like red hair much and she was married. But there was something about her, a warmth, a sexiness that lived just below the surface.

Django barreled into him and slobbered all over his face. Seth patted the dog and waited for Sam. When he didn't appear, Seth wandered into the hallway to see Ellie. He found Jamie.

"You look like shit," Jamie observed. "Did you get laid?"

"What are you doing here? Where are Ellie and Marshall?"

"On a road trip. They'll be back in a couple of days." Jamie picked up Sheba. "Time for your massage," he crooned, taking a seat on the living room sofa.

"What kind of road trip?" Seth asked. "Where did they go exactly?"

Jamie used his fingertips to rub Sheba's sides. The cat meowed with pleasure and collapsed in Jamie's lap. "She went home to see her husband. Marsh tagged along for the ride. I'm taking care of Sheba and your dog while they're gone."

Seth sat down hard on a chair. "Is she...are they...when do you think...?"

"I think she's coming back. At least most of her stuff is still here." Jamie shrugged. "But you never know. She could decide to give it another try." He looked at Seth. "You need to figure out what you're going to do if she does come back."

Chapter Sixteen

Marshall is standing in for me. He is such a good person. No wonder I fell in love with him. Now Ellie doesn't have to do this alone.

A little after midnight they pulled into Ellie's driveway. The lights were on.

"Charlie must have gotten my message. Looks like he's waiting up."

The front door opened and Patti ran out with Dee hot on her heels. Sammy barked frantically and bounced around the back seat.

Ellie eyed Marshall. "You called her?"

"When we stopped for gas," he admitted. "Now get out there and make up." He reached over Ellie and opened her door. Sammy jumped into Ellie's lap and bounded out of the car. Ellie followed.

Patti stood next to the dogs. Ellie could see she had been crying. Suddenly Ellie's anger dissolved and she threw her arms around Patti. "I'm so glad to see you, I missed you so much." Ellie started to cry.

"Sorry, I should have told you. It wasn't right. I missed you too." Patti's voice was muffled against Ellie's shirt. She lifted her head and squinted at Ellie. "Charlie's not here."

"Not here?" Ellie asked.

"I watered your plants Friday. The mailbox was full, so I took everything inside. Then I came over tonight to make sure you had milk for your coffee and such. And he hadn't been here at all." Patti chewed on her lower lip. "I cleaned out your fridge and changed your bed."

"Do you think he's okay?" Marshall opened the trunk and got their suitcases out.

"He's fine. He's probably at his cabin," Ellie said firmly. "Let's go in before we wake the neighbors."

The house looked neglected. Mail was stacked on the table. A fine layer of dust covered everything. The air was musty and Ellie turned on the air conditioning. Sammy ran around the house sniffing everything. Ellie filled his water bowl and put out some kibble. She went through the mail quickly relegating most of it to the recycle bin. Patti followed her chattering like a magpie. Ellie half-listened as she checked her house.

"He hasn't been home in at least a week." She began to worry. "I better call his cell phone."

"If something happened to him you would have heard," Patti said. "He's at the cabin sulking, no doubt."

Ellie nodded. "I'm just tired. I'll find him in the morning. Typical, he's never home when I need him to be. Why should anything change now?"

Marshall came into the room, his cell phone pressed to his ear. "Why don't you talk to her yourself?" He rolled his eyes at Ellie. "Okay, okay. I'll see you in a couple of days." He closed the phone. "Straight people are a mystery."

"What?" Patti sputtered.

"That was Seth," he explained. "He wanted to make sure we made it here safely. Then he wanted to know Ellie's plans and that Django missed her and how did she look, and did she say anything about him." Marshall shook his head. "I told him I'd pass him a note in study hall tomorrow. He didn't find that remark funny."

"Wait a minute." Patti turned to Ellie. "Seth, the beast whose dick gets hard when you look at it, likes you?"

"I didn't hear anything about that!" Marshall turned to Ellie.

Ellie felt her cheeks heat up. "I have nothing to say, except I'm going to bed."

* * *

The next morning, Ellie found Charlie at his office. She was in the reception area talking to Tina when he walked in and froze mid-stride. He looked dressed for court, his shirt crisp and freshly pressed. He held a brown bag in his hand along with his briefcase.

"Hey, Charlie," Ellie said. "Didn't you get my messages?"

"Yeah, I planned on calling you later." He looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Setting his briefcase down, he approached Ellie. She allowed him to kiss her cheek, then pushed him away.

"Do you have time to talk now?" she asked.

"I've got court in an hour." His gaze raked over her. "You look good, really good." Charlie smiled and approached her again. "Let's talk when I get home tonight. There's no hurry now that you're back."

"I'm not staying. I came here because I wanted to do this face to face." Ellie glanced at Tina who was pretending to type on her computer. "Let's go into your office."

"Now what the hell are you talking about?" Charlie ran his hand through his hair. "First you disappear, now you come back and tell me you're not staying."

"First I caught you with a skank." She poked him in the chest. "That was first, remember? Now, do we talk here or in private?" She crossed her arms and glared.

"Private," he snapped. They went into his office.

"What's in the bag?" Ellie asked.

"My lunch."

"You made a lunch? Why are you living at the cabin?" She was puzzled. "It's such a long drive."

"I'm not staying at the cabin." Pretending to look for something, Charlie opened his briefcase.

Ellie looked at the bag, then at Charlie. She took in the neatly pressed shirt and his shiny wingtips. It hit her.

"You went home to your mother?" She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Charlie blushed to the roots of his hair. "She kept coming over to the house. It was just easier to go there." He stood straight. "She likes me around."

Ellie shook her head. "So Mama's taking care of you and from the look of things, better than I did."

"She likes to take care of me."

She took a deep breath, "I don't know how to say this, so here goes. I want a divorce."

"No way."

"We don't have a marriage. We haven't had one for a long time." She twisted her hands in her lap. "We went through the motions, out of habit." She felt the tears start. "You don't love me or you wouldn't have cheated."

"That was a mistake, an awful mistake." He came around the front of the desk and knelt in front of her. "I'll do anything you ask, if you'll stay. Please, Ellie." He smiled at her. "I love you so much. Let's not throw away our life."

She could feel her will slipping away as Charlie took her hands. Then Seth's voice echoed in her head. *If you were my wife, I'd come after you.* She blinked her eyes.

"Why didn't you come after me?" she asked. "I've been gone over a month."

"You wanted to be left alone." He stood and paced his office. "I wasn't about to give in to your childish bid for attention."

"That's what you thought this was?" Ellie was incredulous. "I walked out of your life and you thought I wanted attention?"

"Ellie, come on. Running away is the reaction of a child," he said in his most patient voice. "I knew you would come back. There's no way you'd desert our son. You needed some time to get over your..."

"Snit? Temper tantrum?" Ellie's hands were shaking. "It must have been easy for you. Mama's taking care of you." She picked up the lunch

bag and threw it on the desk. "All the while you got off scot-free, not having to deal with me or the pain you caused."

Charlie grabbed her shoulders. "That's not fair."

"I'll tell you what's not fair." She wrenched herself away. "It's not fair I gave up my entire life for you. It's not fair you haven't once apologized for being unfaithful." She took a deep breath. "I'm going back to New York. I'll be here when CJ comes home from camp. I'd like to stay in the house till he graduates in June, but if you want to stay there, I'll get my own place." She walked to the door.

"I'll let you know when I find a lawyer," she said. "Don't even think about emptying our accounts. I've changed the inheritance accounts to my name only. I've got copies of our statements, so I'll know if money disappears."

"You'll be alone forever if you do this."

"I've been alone in this marriage for a long time." She opened the door. "But now I'll be alone with less laundry."

She was furious, with Charlie, with herself for taking so long to see the truth. She ran out of his office past the staring Tina, then sped out of the parking lot, unsure where to go. Marshall was at his mother's for the day.

She pulled over and called Patti. "We're getting a divorce," she choked out. "He can't see anything beyond his own little world. He's living with his mother for God's sake."

"His mother? Good grief, I'd divorce him just based on that."

"I'm calling a lawyer, then I need get some paperwork."

"You sure about this?" Patti asked.

"I'm sure. I'll see you later."

* * *

Ellie looked at the papers on the kitchen table. She had sorted everything into neat piles. She was stuffing them into manila envelopes when Marshall walked in.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

“This is a marriage, what it comes down to at the end. Assets, liabilities, who gets what.” Ellie picked up another envelope. “We’re getting divorced. I see a lawyer tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.” Marshall touched her shoulder. “What can I do to help?”

Ellie clasped her friend’s hand. “Just being here helps. I don’t feel so alone.”

“Do you need money?” he asked. “Divorces can be expensive.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay.” She gestured at the papers. “Kit was loaded when he died and it all came to me when my folks passed.” She smiled at Marshall. “The problem is keeping Charlie’s mitts off it.”

“But it’s yours, isn’t it?”

“Judges don’t always see it that way. That’s why I need all this documentation.” Ellie noticed Marshall’s puzzled look. “I keep good records of everything. But my husband may have helped himself to some of my inheritance.”

“Snake. How about your lawyer? Did you hire a shark?”

“I hired a lawyer I met at a Bar Association dinner about a year ago. She’s very smart and understands accounting.” Ellie narrowed her eyes. “Charlie thinks she’s a lightweight. I’ll give her the ammunition and turn her loose.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Frannie Zimmerman. She’s about thirty, does a lot of matrimonial work.”

“Sounds like a kindergarten teacher.”

“She looks like a kindergarten teacher.” Ellie gathered up the papers. “Charlie won’t be prepared for her.”

“You want to leave tomorrow after your appointment?”

“Definitely, maybe I can avoid seeing Charlie, or my mother-in-law.”

"My mother thinks I broke up your marriage," Marshall said. "Patti told her mother, who told my mother you've been staying with me and you're getting a divorce."

"She thinks you're cured?" Ellie broke into a big smile.

"Yeah, the candles did their job as far as she's concerned." He looked at the floor. "We have to go there for dinner tonight."

"You're kidding."

"Fraid not. Patti and Joe are coming too. Ma started cooking this morning." He shot Ellie a pleading look. "Please, Ellie."

"Sure, why not. Do I have to pretend to be your girlfriend?" Ellie snickered. "It would make your mother happy." She stood up and put her arms around him. "Want to make out?"

"Stinker." Marshall slapped her butt. "Tell her we're just friends."

"Sure, take all the fun out of it," Ellie said. "Charlie thinks if I divorce him, I'll be alone forever."

"I doubt that."

"CJ starts college in a year." Ellie sat at the table again. "I will be alone."

"Who says you have to stay here? You could move to New York and live with me or move anywhere else you want." He looked around the kitchen. "It's just a house. Sell it."

"I bet Charlie has somebody before the summer is over." Ellie rolled her eyes. "The women will flock to him."

"So what? Do you want to stay married?"

"No, I don't," Ellie replied. "But what will I do with myself after CJ starts college?"

"You don't have to decide that today." Marshall laughed. "Give yourself some time. You'll figure it out."

"I hope so. What time do we have to be at your mom's?"

"Dinner's on the table at six," Marshall replied. "Wear something with an elastic waist."

"You have elastic waist pants?"

“No. I was hoping you had a caftan I could borrow? Or maybe just a simple sheath?”

“Trying to give your mother a heart attack?”

“She’ll outlive all of us. Don’t worry. I brought some sweatpants.”

“That’ll look nice,” Ellie said.

Chapter Seventeen

I'm glad all my money is helping Ellie now. She is finally standing up for herself. I wish I could cheer her on, but at least Marshall is there for her. Those two are good for each other. Ellie has the freedom to make her own decisions, pursue her dreams. Finally, my baby sister gets a turn. And Marshall, my soul mate, is coming out of his twelve-year funk. Things are looking up, but life is funny and rarely turns out as planned. One thing about being dead, it gives you perspective.

Marshall ran his fingers through Jamie's hair. His head rested on Marshall's chest. He and Ellie had got back late the previous evening, to find Jamie waiting for them. It surprised Marshall at how glad he was to see Jamie. It felt so good to have him in his bed. Amazing sex for sure, but the affection and warmth afterward was more important to Marshall.

"We should get up," Marshall said.

"Why?" Jamie raised his head. "Do I need to make a speedy exit?"

Marshall winced. "I apologized for that." He brushed his fingers over Jamie's face. "I'd like to stay here all day, but I've got a conference call with the producers of the show. They all want to be in the same room when they fire me."

"You think they'll fire you?" Jamie placed his hand on Marshall's chest.

"They'll be nice about it, say the show is going in another direction or that they need a mother-daughter dynamic, but the result will be the same." Marshall propped a pillow behind him. "I'm out. We only filmed

two episodes including the pilot. They can reshoot the scenes I'm in or scrap those two episodes."

"But you had nothing to do with her overdosing. You probably saved her life."

"Maybe, but I won't sleep with her and it's her production company, so I'm out."

"She came on to you?"

"Yeah, she showed up at my suite, high on something." Marshall closed his eyes. "I tried to get her to go to the pool or the coffee shop with me. I didn't need a sixteen-year-old in my hotel room. But she said she wanted to talk for a minute. The next thing I knew she was all over me, unzipping my pants, kissing me. It was embarrassing."

"Poor baby," Jamie said. "You being gay didn't stop her?"

Marshall shook his head. "It only made me more attractive. I finally convinced her it wasn't going to happen. Then she started crying and throwing herself around the room. The kid is a mess."

"All teenagers are a mess."

"True, but add in the fact she's a little empire of her own with twenty people working for her, not to mention being stalked by reporters. She's under a lot of pressure," Marshall sighed. "I got her calmed down, then I called her mother and drove her home."

"How did she end up in your hotel room?" Jamie said.

"After I dropped her off, I was in Lucy Thompson's neighborhood. So I called her from the car, asked if I could stop by."

"You were on *Annie's Place* with her."

"Lucy is terrific. I really missed her after the show ended. I went to her house, visited with her and her family, stayed for dinner." Marshall rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Then I went back to the hotel and found Clarissa in my room, in my bed, naked and out cold. An empty pill bottle in her hand. I called 911, then the front desk. I stood in the hallway until the ambulance got there."

"Jesus, that's awful. No wonder the cops and the press were questioning you."

"Yeah. Lucy and her husband saved me. Clarissa's mother still thinks I messed around with her daughter." Marshall swung his legs out of bed and eyed Jamie. "That's why they'll fire me from the show. My big TV comeback is over."

"Do you even like TV?"

"It pays well and you don't work that hard, not like the theater. The money I made from TV lets me do what I want."

"That's not an answer," Jamie stated.

"No, I don't like it," Marshall replied. "How's that for an answer?"

"So stop worrying. Stay in New York, work in New York." Jamie hopped out of bed and drew Marshall to his feet. "I want you here." He put his arms around Marshall and nuzzled his neck. "Let's take a shower."

"I could fall in love with you," Marshall blurted.

"Fall away." Jamie smiled. "I'll catch you."

"I believe you will," Marshall said as he kissed him. They tumbled back on the bed, the shower forgotten.

* * *

Ellie slipped her headphones on and booted up her computer. The dogs lay snoozing at her feet. She emailed her completed financial disclosure forms to her lawyer. It had taken hours to complete them but Ellie was satisfied they were correct. Depressing, looking at everything in black and white. Marriage shouldn't be a business proposition.

She looked out the window and thought about her meeting with Frannie Zimmerman. They'd spent two hours together, going through all Ellie's documents. At the end she gave Frannie a large retainer and agreed to let her hire a forensic accountant. It looked like Charlie was not only unfaithful but had played fast and loose with their money. Ellie

closed all but their joint checking account and set up new accounts in her name only. She also changed stockbrokers, as their current broker was a golf buddy of Charlie's.

Being out of town made things easier. She didn't pick up when Charlie called her cell and deleted the voicemails without listening. She talked to CJ every day and he was doing well, looking forward to seeing her at parent's weekend. She hadn't told CJ the separation was permanent. He didn't ask and like most teenagers was self-absorbed.

"Hey, shouldn't you get ready?" Marshall's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Are you sure you want to go out?" Ellie asked.

"Absolutely. Getting fired from a dumb television show is plenty of reason to celebrate," Marshall stated firmly. "Norrine thinks we can sue for breach of contract. So get ready, I think we should stay out all night."

"I'm ready." She turned her computer off and stood.

"That's what you're wearing?" he asked.

Ellie looked down at her T-shirt and jeans. "It's clean," she ventured.

Marshall shook his head sadly. "And not sexy at all."

"I'm not going for sexy. I want comfortable."

"Where's your dancing dress?" He walked toward her closet.

"Cleaners."

Marshall looked her up and down. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just don't feel like getting torted up."

"C'mon, Jamie and I want to dance with you. And Seth will be looking for you."

"Seth won't even notice if I'm there."

"Of course he will."

"He'll be focused on his playing and other stuff."

"You mean the lovely Jennie?"

"She's amazing, talented and so beautiful," Ellie replied. "Can you blame him?"

"What makes you think he's interested?" Marshall flopped on the foot of the bed.

Ellie shrugged. "Who wouldn't be?"

"Ah, I see, nothing. You're basing this on Seth being a horn dog."

"Well, he is a horn dog."

Marshall laughed. "I thought you weren't interested."

Ellie fiddled with her hair. "You guys go. I'll stay here with the dogs."

"Nothing doing." Marshall got up and rifled through Ellie's closet. "Let's see what you've got."

Ellie sat back and watched. "I look fine."

"Nothing, there's nothing in here." Marshall shut the door. "Go take a shower. I'm calling Jamie."

"What for?"

"He needs to stop and get you a thong. Unless you have one?" Ellie shook her head. "That's what I thought."

* * *

"This is like a dream I have." Ellie rode in a cab with Marshall and Jamie, en route to the jazz club. "I'm out in public in my underwear."

"It's not yours, it's my grandmother's," Marshall said. "And it's underwear from the fifties, which by today's standards is very modest."

"You look totally hot," Jamie assured her.

"I'm out in public in a slip and a thong." Ellie crossed her arms.

"Don't forget your 'come fuck me' shoes," Jamie reminded her.

Ellie looked at her feet. "I thought they were dancing shoes."

"Here we are." Marshall paid the cab driver and helped Ellie out. A light breeze swirled around her and the silk slip teased her skin. The slip, a relic from Marshall's grandmother, smelled of lavender.

Jamie slipped an arm around Ellie's waist. "C'mon, hot stuff, we don't want to waste this on the sidewalk."

The music was playing and the club was starting to fill up, but Marshall secured them a table near the front. Ellie felt even more nervous as she sat. The pale green of the slip stood out in the darkened club. The silk reflected what little light there was. A few couples moved on the miniscule dance floor. Engrossed in playing, Seth didn't notice them. A waitress took their drink orders and Marshall grabbed Ellie's hand.

"Let's dance." He grinned from ear to ear. "A reporter from *The Voice* is here." He pulled Ellie into his arms. "Let's give him something to report."

Marshall was an excellent partner, his hand firm on her back. She laid her head on his chest and gave herself up to the music.

"Seth just spotted us," Marshall whispered. "His mouth is open. He may be drooling."

"No way." Ellie shifted so she could see. Seth stared, an angry scowl on his face. "He looks mad."

Marshall dipped Ellie smoothly and twirled her.

"You're distracting him. You make him nuts." Marshall pressed close to her. "Did you hear that missed chord?"

"That reporter is sitting with Jamie," Ellie observed.

"Time to sit down then." Marshall kissed her cheek. "Dance with me later?"

"If I don't die of embarrassment first."

By the time Marshall finished talking to the reporter, Ellie was on her third glass of wine. Jamie was deep in conversation with a girl from one of his acting classes.

Ellie watched Seth play. He wore black, his hair tied back at the nape of his neck. She saw a glimpse of his chest from the open buttons on his shirt. Ellie wanted to nestle her face in the hollow of his throat. She felt very warm from the wine and decided a trip to the ladies room was in order.

Ellie ran cool water over her wrists and freshened her lipstick. The slip held up well as she examined herself in the mirror. Now if she could just control the heat welling up inside her.

As she exited the ladies room, a hand grabbed her arm and pulled her into a short hall. Before she could protest, she found herself pressed against the outside wall of the club trapped between Seth's arms.

"Aren't you supposed to be playing?" Ellie gulped. The heat spread and parts of her started to throb.

"Break." He stared, eyes narrowed, his breath warm on her face. "I want you to leave."

"Why? You asked me to come. I like hearing you play and I want to see Jennie."

"You have to leave." Seth was adamant. "You're blowing it for me."

"I'm not doing anything." Ellie tried to shove Seth's arms away. "Let me go."

She stopped struggling as Seth lowered his mouth to hers. He pulled her away from the wall and gathered her close to him. God, he felt good, hard and warm and so male. She loosened his hair and ran fingers through the soft, thick strands. His mouth was demanding and she gave him everything she had. He cupped the back of her head with one hand and lifted her leg to wrap around him with the other. His lips broke away from her mouth and trailed a line of fire down her neck. Ellie slipped one hand between them and rubbed the front of his pants.

"Stop." Seth groaned. "Or I'll take you right here. See what you do to me. I can't focus on anything but you."

Ellie pressed against him, even as he tried to push her away. "I want to be with you," she whispered. "So much." She nibbled his neck and squeezed his buttocks.

"What did you say?"

Ellie lifted her head from his shoulder. "You heard me." She grinned as understanding grew in his eyes. "But not here. Later, after you finish playing." She kissed him lightly. "I'm going back to the table, and think of all the things I want to do with you."

"Not so fast." Seth pulled her into his arms again. "Kiss me some more. I've got another five minutes."

* * *

"What the hell have you been doing?" Jamie asked when Ellie finally returned to the table.

"Ladies room." Ellie slugged back the last of her wine and signaled the waitress for another round.

"You've been making out." Jamie turned her face toward him. He looked to the stage where Seth was setting up his guitars.

"With Seth. You messed up his hair and his mouth looks swollen." He looked at Ellie again. "Your lips are swollen too and you've got razor burn on your cheek."

"I kissed him for luck," Ellie mumbled.

"Sure you did." Jamie snickered. "Are you going to go all the way with him or wait till he asks you to the prom?"

Ellie punched his arm. "None of your business. Where's Marshall?"

"He's tablehopping," Jamie pointed to a group of people surrounding Marshall. "He knows a lot of people here."

"He seems pretty happy about being fired."

"TV is garbage. He's better off in New York," Jamie said. "Norrine's got feelers out. He'll work again soon."

"And he has you." Ellie smiled at Jamie. "That's the best part I'm sure."

"He's amazing."

"Who's amazing?" Marshall asked as he sat down. "And just what have you been up to, Ellie-Belly?" He ran a finger down her cheek. "Making out with Seth?"

"Am I wearing a sign?" Ellie squeaked.

"No, I saw you two disappear into the alley," Marshall replied. "Please be careful."

“I’ve been careful my entire life.” Ellie picked up the glass of wine that appeared on the table. “I’m sick of it.” She took a long sip. “Now let’s listen to Jennie.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ellie and Marshall in a jazz club dancing to great music, nothing could be better. How I miss the pleasure of music and dancing, being with people who love you. Maybe this is my penance for taking it all for granted.

Seth came home as the sun was rising. The gig had gone very well. Jennie closed the final set with the classic “Bring it on Home to Me”. That brought the house down. Seth was jubilant. But the best part was having Ellie there, watching him. She glowed, all red hair and sass as she danced with her two dates. Between sets, they had a few more stolen moments that drove them both crazy. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He found the light on in the living room and Ellie sprawled on the couch, snoring. The cat cuddled on her chest, Sam nestled between her legs and Django sprawled on the floor next to her. He thumped his tail and raised his head. Seth patted the dogs and gently lifted the cat off Ellie and placed her on a chair.

Seth kissed her forehead and she smiled sleepily “Thought you’d never get here.”

“Sorry, we had to go over some things,” Seth said. “C’mon, let’s get you to bed.” He pulled her to a sitting position.

“You’ve changed your mind, haven’t you?” Ellie asked. “That’s why you stayed out all night.”

“Jesus, no. But I think we should wait till we’re both conscious.”

“I’m awake.” Ellie’s eyes drifted shut.

"I can see that." Seth half-carried her to the bedroom. He got her in the bed and watched the dogs jump up. "No way, mutts." He pointed to the floor. "The big dog is taking over." The dogs reluctantly got down. Seth dropped his shirt, pants and shoes, and got in beside Ellie. As he settled next to her, she turned over and spooned him, the silk from her slip cool and smooth against his back. Seth closed his eyes and fell asleep in seconds.

* * *

Ellie woke to the smell of coffee. She tried to turn over to find the dogs pinning her to the bed. She moved them and sat up. Seth came in with two cups. He looked rumpled in an old T-shirt and cut-off jeans. He gestured and both dogs got down on off the bed.

"When did you teach them that?"

"You're not the only one who can tame savage beasts." He handed her a steaming mug and slid into bed.

"I should take them out," Ellie said.

"They've been out and they've been fed." Seth took a sip of coffee and set it on the nightstand. He played with a strand of her hair. "Last night was great," he murmured as he kissed her ear.

"It was? I don't remember much." Ellie gulped some coffee and burned her mouth. "Shit, too hot." She put the cup on the nightstand.

"Relax, we slept." Seth slid his hand under the covers and rubbed her belly. "You kept your arm around me all night. I liked it."

"Oh, so we didn't." Ellie face flushed. "I'm sorry I fell asleep. I may have had a little too much wine."

"That's okay, we've got all day." Seth ran his fingers over her hip. "Now come here."

He kissed down her throat, leaving a trail of fire. Ellie grabbed his head and kissed him. She melted under him as their mouths explored, her tongue twining with his in an intimate dance.

"Ellie, Jesus Ellie, you make me crazy." Seth's hands went everywhere, touching, exploring. He traced her lips with his fingers. "I love kissing you." He lowered his mouth to hers.

Ellie hadn't been kissed or devoured like this in years. She slipped her hands under his shirt and buried her fingers in the hairs on his chest. She rubbed his flat nipples until they peaked. Seth yanked his shirt off, then helped Ellie out of the delicate slip. He sat back and slowly smiled at her. All that was left was the lacy thong.

"You're all pink and white, like a doll." Seth touched her feather light, tracing the contours of her body. Ellie blushed under his scrutiny.

She tugged at the waistband of his shorts. He stayed her hands. "Let's slow down a little," he said as he continued to touch her.

Ellie's insecurities came rushing to the surface. "You don't like my body? My breasts are too small and I've got some stretch marks..."

"No, no." He took her hand and placed it on the front of his shorts. He was rock hard and his penis jumped as she felt it through the thin cloth. "It's been a while, and I want this to be good for you, make it last." He gulped as he took her hand away. "I'm the big bad wolf and I want to eat you all up."

He nuzzled between her breasts and then took her nipple in his mouth. Ellie clenched as a white-hot bolt of pleasure shot through her. "They're perfect, perfect." He switched to the other nipple. He took his time with her breasts, rubbing, sucking, even biting a little.

Ellie writhed on the mattress as he moved to her belly and started taking off her thong. "All pink and white." He slipped the scrap of lace away. He nudged her thighs apart and smiled. "So lovely, so sweet." He stroked her thighs. "I've wanted you since the first time I saw you."

"Me too." Ellie sighed. She opened her thighs wider. He slid his hand over her center and she trembled.

There was a knock on the door. "Seth, you in there?" Marshall called.

"Go away." Seth slipped one finger inside her. "We're busy."

"Seth, you better take this. It's Jennie's manager. They want you in the recording studio, something about an arrangement you did."

Seth sat up and stared at Ellie. "He'll be right there." She motioned to the door. "Go, take the call."

Seth kissed her hard and bolted from the room. Ellie pulled the sheet up and tried to calm her racing heart.

"You still alive?" Marshall said from the other side of the door.

"I think so. I'll be out in a minute."

Ellie put on a pair of shorts and Seth's abandoned shirt. She followed the dogs into the kitchen, where Marshall sat at the table wearing only a pair of ancient jeans. They were faded almost white and clung to his long legs and lean hips like a second skin. The effect was dizzying and Ellie's heart sped up again beating even faster as he smiled at her, brown eyes twinkling, his blond hair falling over his forehead.

"Hey, Ellie." He put his coffee down. "Want some toast?"

"I'll make it." She dropped a couple slices of bread into the toaster. "Any possibility you could lower the wattage just a bit?"

"Huh?" Marshall walked over to her. "What wattage?"

"The gorgeous, half-naked-man-in-the-kitchen wattage. I'm a little sensitive right now."

Marshall grabbed a shirt from a neatly folded stack on the dryer and slipped it over his head. "Better?"

The shirt perfectly matched the jeans, faded, soft and also skin tight. "Yeah, at least your chest is covered."

Ellie poured coffee while Sheba meowed from the floor. She picked the cat up and carried her to a chair, stroking her fur, mumbling nonsense to her.

"Sorry, about the interruption, but Seth would have killed me." Marshall sat and picked up his coffee.

"That's okay, I understand." Ellie continued to stroke Sheba.

Seth bounded into the kitchen. "There you are," he cried. "I've got to get to the recording studio. They liked the arrangement of 'Bring it on Home to Me'. Her producer was in the club last night. He decided to put it on her album."

“That’s great. It’s an old Sam Cooke tune.” Marshall hummed a few bars.

“Yeah, it’s perfect for Jennie’s voice.” The toast popped. Seth grabbed it, slathered butter and crunched down, scattering crumbs everywhere. “Got to go.” He snatched a paper napkin off the table and wiped his hands. “See you.” He patted Ellie’s shoulder. The front door slammed ten seconds later.

Ellie deposited Sheba in Marshall’s lap and put more bread in the toaster. “Well, that was nice while it lasted.” She refilled their mugs of coffee. “He patted me like I was Django.”

“He’s a musician,” Marshall reminded her. “The successful ones are driven, to the exclusion of everything else. Seth is going to be a very successful musician.”

Ellie sat at the table and stared into her coffee. “I understand that and it’s really okay.”

“You seem a little on edge.”

“I wonder what it would be like to come first with somebody.” Ellie sighed wistfully.

“That should be pretty easy to find out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come first with yourself,” Marshall said. “Put your needs and desires first.” He took Ellie’s hand. “I’m not saying you should abandon your responsibilities, just think about what makes you happy.” Marshall handed her a notepad and pen. “Write down what you love.”

Ellie was good at making lists. It helped keep her organized. Marshall got up when the toast popped and brought it to her. She hadn’t written anything.

“About Seth,” Marshall started. “Don’t fall in love, okay? Have a fling, enjoy yourself, but don’t expect anything more.”

Ellie looked at the blank pad and nodded. “Maybe I should quit while I’m ahead.”

“I really care about you. And not just because you’re Kit’s sister.”

Ellie got up and hugged him. "This would be whole lot easier if you were straight."

"You're telling me."

"So what are you doing for the weekend?" Ellie sat and picked up the newspaper.

"Jamie and I are going to the Hamptons."

Ellie wagged her eyebrows at him. "How romantic."

"Calm down. We're at Norrine's place. She's having a party. It'll be good for Jamie to meet some people. And since I probably paid for at least one bedroom in the place, I should get to use it once in a while."

"Sounds great. I'll bet Jamie is flipping out."

"He went home to pack. You want to come with us?"

Ellie shook her head. "I'll stay here. I got a ticket to see *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* tonight and I'm going to Elizabeth Arden tomorrow for the whole day."

"Getting the works?"

"Facial, body wrap, wax, manicure, pedicure and a massage."

"Sounds great," Marshall said. "Giving up on Seth?"

"Not at all, but I won't be an afterthought. The next time, I'm calling the shots.

"See, putting yourself first isn't that hard."

"I'm working on my list too."

Marshall cuddled Sheba close. "Stay down, old girl, there's a tiger on the loose."

* * *

Ellie was getting ready to leave for the theater when Seth burst into her room. He flopped on the bed next to Django and Sammy. The dogs barked happily and soon were wrestling with Seth.

"Having fun?" she asked when all three lay sprawled, panting.

"Sure, but I'd rather roll around with you." Seth bounced off the bed and put his arms around Ellie. "You smell great."

"Thanks." Ellie kissed him and moved out of his arms.

"Where you going?" Seth tried to pull her back.

"To the theater." Ellie picked up a small handbag and rifled through it.

"But I've got two hours. I thought we could...you know."

"Two whole hours? That's tempting, but this is third row orchestra for *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. It cost a fortune. I don't want to be late." She kissed him again and left the room.

Seth looked at empty doorway, then at the dogs. "You guys got any idea what's with your mom?"

* * *

Marshall squinted in the bright sunshine. Small waves lapped on the beach and the horizon looked endless. He turned to Norrine who sat in the chaise next to him.

"Thanks for asking us." He pointed to Jamie who was playing volleyball with Norrine's kids and husband. "Jamie is having a great time. So am I."

"He's a sweet boy." She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Talented too. He's auditioning for *Harper's Point* next week."

"What's that?"

"New soap. The part is small, but recurring." She shrugged. "It's a start and the money isn't too bad." She glanced at him. "You like this one?"

"Yeah, I do, very much. He wants me to meet his family."

"Sounds serious." She patted his hand. "About time you got over the football player."

"That'll never happen, but that doesn't mean I can't fall in love again."

Jamie raced up to the patio. He tugged on Marshall's hand. "Let's go for a swim, I'm hot." Norrine's eight-year-old twin girls danced around them.

Marshall scooped up one twin and ran to the water. "Last one in is an old poop."

Jamie grabbed the other twin and took off after them.

* * *

"I told you to put more sunscreen on after we got out of the water." Marshall applied Aloe Vera to Jamie's back.

"Is it bad?"

"It's red, but nobody will confuse you with a lobster. Your skin is so fair, you really need to be careful." He smeared more lotion on Jamie's legs.

"Are my legs burned?"

"No, not too much. I just like touching you," Marshall admitted. "Did you have a good time today?"

"Sure, it's great to get out of the city. Norrine's kids are really sweet."

"You're good with them."

"I love kids. I want at least two."

"You want kids?" Marshall stopped rubbing.

"Sure, don't you? You would make a terrific dad. A little girl with your eyes would be irresistible."

Marshall capped the lotion and put it on the nightstand. He walked to the window and looked out. "You live in a fantasy world."

"What? Gay people have children all the time. They use surrogates or adopt. It's not out of the realm of possibility." Jamie got up and embraced Marshall from behind. "Didn't you and Kit want a family?"

Marshall laughed bitterly. "Kids? No, we never talked about having kids. Kit never came out, remember? He was a big macho football player. He dated women for Christ sakes. He even took some of them home and

fucked them silly.” Marshall pulled away from Jamie. “I was his secret, the one he spent most of his time hiding. Kids weren’t an option, not for us, not for me.” Marshall walked to the bathroom. “The party starts in an hour, we better get ready.”

* * *

Seth took in the crowd as they applauded. He picked up the acoustic guitar for the next song and saw Ellie sitting at the bar. She glowed, as if someone had painted her with moonlight. What had she been up to? When he’d tried to find her Saturday morning, she was gone. He and the dogs hung around the apartment most of the afternoon, waiting for her. By the time he had to leave for the club, she still hadn’t come home.

Ellie spotted him and raised her glass in salute. Then the man sitting next to her whispered in her ear and she threw her head back and laughed.

“Seth, you ready?” Jennie’s hand covered the microphone.

“Sure.” Seth picked up the guitar and waited for her signal. They played, getting better and more at ease with each other as Jennie’s voice filled the room.

When the set ended, Ellie ran up to hug Jennie. The two women went to Jennie’s tiny dressing room and closed the door. They came out just before the last set. Ellie smiled at Seth as she headed back to her seat at the bar. They swung into the music and played their hearts out.

The crowd was into them and the last set flew by. Seth hopped off the stage and headed to the bar. He had seen Ellie dancing with a couple of guys, but she always returned to her seat at the bar.

Every time he caught her eye, she would smile and make his heart beat faster. He wanted to find her, get her out of the club and get her naked in the bedroom as fast as possible. They would have the place to themselves too, with Marshall gone.

"Seth, we're going to this after-hours place in the village," Ollie said. Seth didn't see Ellie anywhere. Ollie grabbed his arm. "Hey, man, pay attention."

"What?" Seth continued to look around.

"Come with us. We'll catch some food, maybe jam for awhile." Ollie gestured to two women sitting at a table. "Those two fine ladies are coming with us, the blonde was asking about you."

Seth looked at the women. The blonde was very attractive and had a great body. When she returned his smile, he felt exactly nothing. No tingle, no stirrings anywhere.

"Thanks, but I'm beat. I plan to sleep till Monday."

Ollie looked at him as though he lost his mind. "Whatever, man, but you're missing out."

Seth nodded. "Have you seen Ellie?"

"The tall redhead with the legs? She's in the back with Jennie."

"Thanks."

But when he checked the dressing room both women were gone.

* * *

Marshall looked down at his fifth Diet Coke and dumped it on the sand. He wanted a real drink, vodka with a squeeze of lemon or Dewar's straight. Hell, even a beer would taste good. He observed the party from his vantage point on the beach. Laughter and Caribbean music drifted down. Couples danced by the pool.

Still reeling from the conversation with Jamie earlier, Marshall walked to the water and let the waves lap over his feet. Jamie was delusional. Kids, he wanted kids. Wasn't it difficult enough being gay, much less a parent? Jamie's blithe assumption that a child was in his future angered Marshall. This is what came from falling in love. Good thing he found out before things went any further.

He craved a drink and could taste the Scotch in his mouth, feel its comforting burn all the way down his throat. On his way to the bar, a tall black-haired man caught his eye. The man winked and thrust his hips ever so slightly in Marshall's direction. Marshall hooked his thumbs in his jeans and nodded toward the beach. As Marshall and the stranger walked toward the cover of sand dunes, he saw Jamie watching them. Marshall wrapped his arm around the man's shoulders and drew him near. Time for Jamie to grow up and understand what being a gay man was about.

Chapter Nineteen

Marshall is screwing up, snatching misery from the jaws of happiness. Jamie is good for him. He's still young enough to see limitless possibilities. I hope he can convince Marshall that life still holds a lot for both of them.

I loved kids. It never occurred to me that we could be parents. Jamie is right. Marshall would make a great dad.

Sunday morning, after running with the dogs, Ellie hopped in the shower. She would take herself out to breakfast and spend some time with the Sunday times. She was planning where to go when Seth stuck his head in the shower.

"Good morning," he said.

"Get the hell away from me," she cried out. She took the wash puff and stuffed it in his mouth, then aimed the spray at his eyes. He retreated but still managed to pinch her butt.

"Breakfast in ten," he hollered.

Ellie found a cup of coffee sitting on the vanity. She sipped it as she dried off and dressed.

The dogs were busily chewing pig's ears when she came into the kitchen. Fresh flowers adorned the table. A honeydew melon filled with strawberries made Ellie's stomach rumble. Seth flipped pancakes at the stove.

"Wow, what's the occasion?" Ellie asked.

"No occasion, I just wanted to make you breakfast." He took the plate of pancakes to the table. Ellie stood in the doorway.

"I'm not sleeping with you," she announced.

“Okay, come and eat before they get cold.”

They ate in silence, trading parts of the paper. Seth got up and poured more coffee. When they were done, Ellie cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher. She could feel Seth’s gaze on her as she moved about the kitchen.

“You have great legs,” Seth remarked. “I love them.”

“Thanks, I’m still not sleeping with you.”

“You said that earlier.” He brought his empty cup to the dishwasher. He leaned in and sniffed her hair. “What kind of shampoo?”

“I got it yesterday, at Elizabeth Arden.” Ellie backed up and pressed herself against the counter. His nearness was unnerving.

“Fancy, it suits you.” He ran two fingers up her arm. “Did you get the works? Your skin feels like satin.” He leaned closer.

“I had a little pampering. I deserved it and I’m still not sleeping with you.”

“Hey, get your mind out of the gutter. I’m just checking to see if you got your money’s worth.” He slid his lips over her cheek. “The facial was completely unnecessary. The skin on your face is soft as a baby’s butt.”

Ellie closed her eyes. “I had my legs waxed.” She lifted a leg. “See?”

Seth grinned as his hand cupped her calf. “Very nice.” His hand moved higher. “Just a leg wax? Or did you have a bikini wax too?”

Ellie tried to catch her breath. “I’m hoping to get to the beach soon.”

“And will you be wearing a bikini?” Seth moved in front of her and wrapped her leg around his waist. “I’d like to see it.” He kissed her neck. “Maybe we could go to the beach together.”

Ellie dropped her leg. “Won’t you be too busy? I’d hate for you to be at the beach and miss an important phone call.”

Seth backed away. He took his cell phone out of his pocket and dropped it in the garbage can. Then he grabbed the kitchen extension and set it on the counter.

"I'm sorry about the other day." Seth shook his head. "I don't know what came over me. But it really did turn out to be a great break. We're back in the studio Monday and..."

"Shut up." Ellie touched his chest. "Shut up."

Ellie brushed her lips on his. Her arms went around his neck and she ran her fingers through his hair. She opened and took him inside her mouth. Seth moaned and drew her closer. They kissed for what seemed hours, Ellie growing dizzy. Finally she broke away.

"Okay, I'll sleep with you. And don't throw away your cell. Just turn it off."

He smiled and kissed her again.

Ellie wasn't sure how they ended up in Seth's bedroom, but there they were, standing at the foot of his bed. The sheets on the bed looked fresh. He hit the button on his stereo and the sultry saxophone of Stan Getz filled the room.

"Nice touch." She listened. "Isn't that my CD?"

"Maybe." He pulled his shirt over his head.

Ellie sighed as she looked at broad expanse of his chest. She placed her palm flat on it. "You're lovely."

"You too." He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her between his knees. "Don't worry about protection. I have a whole drawer full of condoms."

"Do you buy them in bulk?"

"No, I don't," he said. "And I don't sleep around either, despite what you may have heard. Most women can't put up with me for long."

Ellie lifted his chin and smiled at him. "I find that hard to believe."

"Why? I don't have money, or a decent job. Or even a place to call my own."

"But you have these." Ellie cradled his big hands in her smaller ones. "These make magic every time you pick up that guitar." She pressed one hand over his heart. "The magic starts here though."

"You understand then." He brought his hands to her breasts. His thumbs caressed her nipples through the thin shirt. "It's not a choice for me. It has to come out."

Ellie nodded and drew her shirt over her head. "Play me."

As he lay back on the bed, Seth pulled her on top. Ellie rubbed her breasts on his chest, loving the sensation. Their lips met and she was swept away again. His kiss was hungry and consuming. His hands roamed over her back. She returned his kisses as a stream of liquid fire spread through her body.

"Ellie, Ellie, so sweet, so hot," Seth breathed. He turned them over and pressed her into the mattress. His mouth sucked on her neck.

Ellie giggled and tried to push him away. "You're giving me a hickey."

"At least one." His lips moved down her throat to her collarbone, lingering at her shoulders. She sighed with pleasure as he kissed her breasts. When he suckled them, a rush of heat ran through her. He spent a long time moving from her breasts, to her neck to her mouth. She squirmed, needing him to touch her everywhere.

"Seth, please, I want you." She tried to wiggle out of her shorts. They were in the way.

"Slow down, baby, we're just getting started." He fingered the waistband of her shorts. "You want these off?"

"Yes." She lifted her hips. "Now. Take them off now."

He cupped her through the fabric, rubbing her, slipping a finger up one leg and brushing her inner thigh. He slid down her body, kissing her stomach, tonguing her navel. Seth stopped her from undoing her shorts.

"Don't make me tie you up."

"Tie me up?" Ellie squeaked.

Seth lifted his head from her stomach and wiggled his eyebrows. "I'm kidding. We'll do that later."

He went back to kissing her stomach. When Seth finally inched her shorts off, every nerve ending in her body sang. She sat up and began working the buttons on his jeans.

He stopped her again. "What's the hurry?" He pushed her down on the pillows and cupped her knees. "Let me play," he whispered.

When his hands brushed her curls, she tensed a little then forced herself to relax. He touched her lightly, gently brushing her inner thighs with his lips. It felt wonderful and strange and very personal. He moved from her thighs to her center and kissed her there.

Ellie tried to push him away and close her legs at the same time. "You don't have to do that," she said.

He lifted his head. "Don't you like it?"

Ellie hid her face. "Yes, no, I don't know."

Seth crawled up her body and forced her to look at him. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, I just don't want to turn you off."

"Turn me off? I don't understand." He put a big hand over her center and started to rub.

"You know, I'm so wet down there and I don't want ruin it for you."

"You're so wet because you want me, because you're excited." He continued his intimate massage. "How could that ruin it?" His thumb found her clitoris and flicked it gently. "I want to kiss you, taste you there, make you even wetter, make you come. It's so beautiful, Ellie."

Ellie gasped and started to move her hips. "God, that feels so good."

"Let me make it better." His mouth and tongue took the place of his big hand. He nipped and sucked on her clitoris, giving her wave upon wave of pleasure.

When he slipped two fingers inside her, Ellie screamed. She opened her eyes to watch Seth feast on her, and tipped over the edge. Seth didn't stop until her breath slowed down. She lay there limp, replete.

Ellie heard the sound of a condom being opened. Seth was naked, his erection magnificent. She sat up and took the condom.

"Wait," she said. "Lean back."

She circled his shaft with her hand as she blew on the engorged head. Seth moaned as she kissed the tip of his penis and ran her tongue

up and down the shaft. Now it was Seth's turn to squirm. She took as much of him in her mouth as she could. She knew how to do this.

Seth was losing control, Ellie's mouth and hands were everywhere, cupping his sac, kneading it in her fingers. Her mouth was tight and hot as he thrust inside. She was a mystery. She knew how to give pleasure, but didn't know how to receive it. Time to change that and right now.

"Ellie, stop or I'm going to come," he groaned.

She lifted her head. "It's okay, go ahead." She took him in her mouth again.

"No, damn it, I want to be inside you." He disengaged himself and reached for the condom. Ellie sat back on her heels and watched him struggle to put it on.

"Let me help."

"No, no. I'm too close." He finished. "C'mere."

He drew her down and started kissing her again, caressing her breasts, playing between her legs until she whimpered.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered.

"You. I want you," she croaked.

He rubbed the tip of his cock at her entrance. She opened her legs wider to receive him. He pushed himself inside her, one inch at a time. She was hot, tight, so good. He struggled to control himself, afraid he might hurt her. But when she dug her hands into his ass and growled, "Ride me," he let go burying himself in her.

She came again as he thrust high and hard, his balls slapping against her. He slowed a little, wanting it to last. She opened her eyes. "Come."

"You first." He picked up the pace.

"I can't," Ellie moaned. "It's too much, too good."

He reached between them and rubbed her clit. She yelped and came again. Her muscles clamped tight around him. That was all he could take as his orgasm smashed through him.

Ellie held on as their hearts slammed together. She wrapped her legs around him tight.

"I'm too heavy," he said.

"No, stay inside me." She refused to let go.

He looked into her eyes. "Good?"

"Good? Good is a totally inadequate word." She pulled him down and gave him a long wet sloppy kiss. "I may have died for a minute there."

"Me too," he admitted. "Did you see a white light or dead relatives?"

"No, but heaven was right around the corner." She kissed him again.

"I have get rid of this condom..." He was getting hard again.

"Oh, sure. Do you want something to eat?" She scooted out from under him.

"No, but we need to get another condom ready."

"Really?" Ellie grinned.

He got rid of the condom and rubbed against her. "Really. Unless you have something better to do?" This time he kissed her.

Chapter Twenty

There weren't that many women and it wasn't as if I liked it all that much. But I had to keep up appearances. I couldn't afford to have any gay rumors out there. So I did what I had to do. I thought Marshall understood. I never knew it bothered him that much. He would laugh it off and take me to bed. Everything would be good again. The only place I ever felt happy and comfortable was with Marsh. I wish I had told him. I want him to be with someone he loves, who loves him. Jamie is the guy.

Well at least Seth pulled his head out of his butt. Ellie's having some fun and it's about time.

"Wake up, Jamie." Marshall shook his shoulder. "C'mon. The twins will be up soon."

"Fuck off," Jamie mumbled as he turned over and almost fell off the chaise lounge.

Marshall caught him and hoisted him to a sitting position. "You can sleep it off in bed."

"Not your bed," he mumbled. "Too crowded." He put his head on Marshall's chest. "Fuck off."

Marshall sighed. "You said that." Jamie struggled to his feet. Marshall steered him into the room they shared. He got him in the bed and brushed the sand off his feet before tucking him in.

Norrine was in the kitchen cutting up fruit. She eyed Marshall as he poured coffee. "Did you get him to bed?"

Marshall nodded. "Sorry he got so drunk."

"Drowning his sorrows." She put napkins on the table. "So you had a good time last night?"

"Sure, nice party."

"And the trip to the beach with the crystal queen, was that nice?"

Marshall set his coffee down. He wanted a drink now. "We took a walk."

"Bullshit, Jamie saw everything." She shook her head in disgust. "He's in love with you and you broke his heart."

"He's young. He'll get over it. It's not as if we agreed to be exclusive."

"You're afraid," Norrine said. "This boy could mean something to you and you piss all over it."

"We're at different places in our lives. He's still a baby."

"And you're an old man? Sounds like more bullshit to me."

"He wants things that gay men can't have."

"Like what? Commitment? Honesty? Love?" She plunked the fruit into a big bowl. "You wanted all that with the football player."

"Yeah and it got him killed." Marshall's hand shook as he picked up his coffee.

"It was an accident. A stupid accident." Norrine took his hands. "You've blamed yourself for twelve years. Let him go. It's time to let him go."

Marshall stared at her for a long moment. "Jamie has this idiotic idea we should have kids."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"God, do you read the papers at all? This country is becoming increasingly homophobic, the nutcases in the Christian right control the government and you think there's no problem with two faggots raising kids."

"I didn't say no problems. Being a parent is problematic no matter if you're gay or straight." Norrine smiled. "They make your life difficult, stressful, expensive, and they'll break your heart. I wouldn't have it any

other way. Open yourself up to the idea. It couldn't hurt to think about it."

Marshall shook his head. "Not happening."

"You used a condom last night on your walk?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but nothing happened. He wanted to get high first, then have sex. I just walked away."

"You do love Jamie."

"Yeah, lucky me." Marshall picked up his cup and put it in the dishwasher. "I'm heading back to the city. I need to find a meeting."

"Okay, we'll bring Jamie tomorrow. Unless you want to wake him?"

"No, let him sleep. It's better if I make myself scarce."

* * *

"What's the hang up with oral sex?" Seth asked.

Ellie put down her chopsticks. They were eating Chinese takeout in bed. Ellie wore his shirt and he had slipped on a pair of jeans. They bribed the animals with an order of pork-fried rice, garlic chicken and a quick stroll around the block. The dogs lay on the floor, chewing another round of pig's ears. Sheba stretched out at the foot of the bed.

"Don't you like how I do that?"

"Like? Christ, Ellie, I love it." He leaned over to kiss her. "You're great, addicting. I meant when I go down on you."

Ellie blushed at his words. She picked up her chopsticks and poked around in a half empty carton. She felt him stare at her. "I don't have a hang up." She ate a bite of chicken. "I liked it. I just don't have much experience with it."

"You mean your husband didn't..."

"He wouldn't do it. I mean we tried a couple of times when we first got married, but he really didn't like it."

"What a jerk. What about before him?"

"There wasn't anybody before him," she said.

"Oh, wow, that's—"

"Weird? Backwards? Stupid?" she interrupted.

"I was going to say amazing, wonderful. That you were faithful to him. You must have really loved the guy."

"I did." She nodded. "He loved me, at least at the beginning."

"No doubt. Do you miss him?"

"Not that much. We didn't spend a lot time together. He was always so busy. I don't think we spent a whole day in bed in twenty years."

Seth put the leftover food on the nightstand and took Ellie in his arms. "How about we find some more things you like? I think we're looking at a long to-do list here."

She whispered something in his ear.

"Now how did a nice girl from Buffalo ever hear about that?" He laughed.

"I read a lot." She got out of the bed. "I'll get the ice cubes."

* * *

The white Dewar's label called to him. He had no trouble finding it in the liquor store. He bought a fifth. As he carried it out, the bottle felt good under his arm. Something to hold. He wanted to talk to Ellie, but when he opened the door to the apartment, he'd heard the sounds of lovemaking coming from Seth's room. Marshall got out quick. That was the last thing he needed. Now he wandered around with bottle of Scotch, not drinking it, just holding it. The sun shone and he decided to sit in the park and think, maybe look at the bottle.

He found a tree, a big unoccupied oak. He sat under it and carefully took the bottle out of the bag. He admired the amber glow of the whiskey. Better not think too much, just do it. He cracked the seal on the bottle. The sound made him happy.

* * *

“Go away, Sam,” Ellie mumbled. “It’s too early.” She shoved the little dog down. Sam continued to whine and was joined by Django slobbering on her face. When Sheba jumped on her pillow and meowed loudly, she sat up and looked at the clock. Then she heard the buzzer. Seth was sound asleep, arm draped over her hips.

“Seth, wake up. There’s somebody at the door.”

“What?”

Ellie jumped out of bed and pulled on a T-shirt and shorts. “The door buzzer, can’t you hear it?”

Seth got into his jeans. “Stay here. I’ll get it.”

Ellie followed him. Seth peered through the peephole. “Shit,” he barked, and yanked open the door. Marshall fell into the foyer. “He’s drunk off his ass,” Seth said in disgust.

“I’m drunk on my ass.” Marshall giggled. He pointed to his backside. “See?”

Ellie tugged at Marshall’s arm. “Can you stand up?” The smell of Scotch was overpowering.

Marshall grabbed her arm and pulled her down on top of him. “Can I ask you a question?”

Ellie scrambled to sit up and cradled his head in her lap. “Did you hurt yourself?”

Seth crouched next to them and glared at Marshall. “You’ve been sober for nine years.”

“Shut up. Go away, I want to talk to Ellie. She’s a mommy. She knows.” He grinned up at her. “Why are you on the ceiling?”

“Jesus, he’s incoherent.” Seth grabbed Marshall under his arms. “Take his feet. We need to get him to the toilet.”

They carried him to the bathroom where Marshall promptly threw up and started to cry.

"What happened? Where's Jamie?" Ellie washed his face. She made him brush his teeth and rinse his mouth out. Seth crouched on the bathroom floor and slipped his shoes off.

"He's on his way to China to adopt a little Chinese baby with my eyes." Marshall looked blearily at them. "Where is my Dewar's?"

"Must have lost it," Seth said.

"I'll get some more tomorrow. We can celebrate the new baby, have a party." Marshall's head started to droop.

"Okay, bedtime." Seth half-carried him to bed. Ellie tucked him in and brushed her fingers across his forehead.

"Ellie, stay for a minute?" Marshall asked.

"Sure." She sat next to Marshall and took his hand. "I'm here." Seth took the dogs out and closed the door.

"I'm really drunk. I like being drunk. It's very liberating."

"I think you should sleep." She massaged his forehead. "Want me to sing you a lullaby?"

"Yeah," he said. "How hard is it to have a kid?"

"Twenty-two hours of labor and seven stitches. It's like passing a bowling ball only harder."

"No, no I mean after that."

"Oh, the being a parent part. Well, I can honestly say it makes labor and delivery seem like a day at the beach."

"I knew it." He pounded the mattress. "It's a great big pain."

"Yeah, and it's the best part of my life. Did I mention that?" Ellie put her arm around him. "Here comes the lullaby."

Marshall closed his eyes then opened them again. "Can you sing?"

"I can. Now hush." She started to croon "Sentimental Reasons".

When she finished, he smiled. "You have a lovely voice. You're a much better person than Kit ever was." He reached up and before she could stop him, kissed her full on the mouth. His breath was minty from the toothpaste and his lips were soft and welcoming. She kissed him

back, surprised he felt so good. He broke away and smiled. "You kiss better than he did too," he mumbled. A minute later, he was snoring.

Ellie ruffled his thick blond hair. "You have to let him go, Marshall." She sat and watched him sleep for a long time.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ellie is a much better person than I ever was. I would have left him on the bathroom floor. No lullabies or kisses from me. What an ass I was. I hope whatever she has in mind helps him. I want him to be happy. I want both of them to be happy.

"No, third shelf. Behind the box of tax records. It's labeled 'Kit'."

"Wait a minute, have to sneeze," Patti said. "It's dusty down here." The sound of a sneeze and the shuffling of boxes came over the line. "Here. It's big. You sure you want me to send everything?"

"And those two photo albums."

"Okay. This will have to be reboxed. I'll take it to the UPS Store."

"Ship it overnight, please?"

"Sure. Do you really think this will help?"

"It couldn't hurt."

"Is he sober now?"

"Seth got up early to check on him and it looks like he went to a meeting."

"Thank God. Wait a minute, how do you know Seth got up early?"

"I ummm heard him, you know, moving around."

"Eleanor Victoria Miller Newman, you're not telling me something." There was a pause. "Sweet Mother of God, you slept with him. You slept with the beast!"

"Keep your voice down."

"And just who is going to hear me? I'm in the basement of your empty house. So was it great?"

"Unbelievable," Ellie whispered.

"Tell me more. I want details."

"No way, it's between me and Seth."

"Oh man. C'mon, throw me a bone here."

Ellie looked around to make sure Seth hadn't come home. "You know those smutty romance novels you read all the time?"

"Yeah?" There was a catch in Patti's voice.

"You were wrong."

"About what?"

"When you said men like that don't exist. They do, they really do."

"Wow, I think I need a cold shower."

At the mention of a shower Ellie giggled.

"Now what?"

"Nothing, nothing." She continued to giggle.

"You did it in the shower! I love doing it in the shower."

"Let's put it this way, I'm very clean."

"Romance novel sex and shower sex?" Patti said. "Wait till I tell Joe."

"Don't tell him. He might let something slip to Charlie."

"Okay, speaking of Charlie, I saw him the other night. He was at Left Bank."

Left Bank was a very nice, slightly pricey restaurant in Buffalo. Charlie had taken her there for dinner once on their anniversary. Ellie had loved it, but Charlie bitched about the prices and the calorie content of the food the whole evening.

"I didn't think he liked it there. Was the skank with him?"

"No, some dark-haired woman, very sleek looking."

"I knew he would hook up with somebody." Ellie sighed.

"It looked like a date, but Charlie didn't seem to have that good a time."

"Did you talk to him at all?"

"Joe did, about parent's weekend at camp. Charlie plans to come."

"Great. He better reserve his own room. You don't think he'll bring somebody with him, do you?"

"Who knows? He's not the most sensitive guy."

"But we agreed not to tell CJ until after camp."

"Look, CJ is a big boy. He knows there are problems. He may have suspicions as it is. So if he finds out sooner, he'll deal with it."

"I just wanted to soften the blow a little, be gentle."

"He's halfway out of the house. You guys splitting up won't impact his life that much."

"I know. He'll probably see more of Charlie after we stop living together."

"True. So tell me more about Seth. Is it an affair, a one-night stand?"

"Not a one-night stand, most likely an affair, maybe a summer romance."

"Not a long-term thing?"

"No, he's thirty for God sakes..."

"So?"

"It just wouldn't work. So I'm going to have fun and not think too much."

"I can see you living in the village with a musician for a lover. You were very free-spirited before Charlie got a hold of you."

"I don't remember," Ellie said.

"I do. We used to sneak into the Imperial Garage to listen to the blues. We were only sixteen. Remember when you scammed that guitar pick off Muddy Waters?"

"He was so nice. We did do all that, didn't we?"

"Yeah, then Charlie came along and you got all conservative."

"I was determined to be a vet. I wanted a nice little practice, do a lot of animal rescue work."

Ellie closed her eyes. She envisioned a clean neat office, with a big bulletin board containing pictures of the dogs and cats she took care of. And another board of pictures of animals looking for homes. She wouldn't turn anyone away because they couldn't pay either. A couple of cats would live at the office. She would have an assistant, maybe two, and a nice person in the front to greet everyone. There would be jazz and blues playing all the time too.

"Ellie, you still there?" Patti's voice was loud in her ears.

"Sure, just thinking. Send that box, will you? And I'll see you at camp next weekend."

"Camp? Are we going to camp?" Seth asked as he came into the kitchen.

"I am. Parent's weekend at CJ's camp," she said. "Did you find Marshall?"

"He's at a meeting and he hooked up with his sponsor." Seth grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. "He spotted me. Good thing I'm not a spy. Anyway he said to tell you he's sorry about last night and that he would make it up to you. Did he do something?"

"Not really. He kissed me right before he went to sleep." Ellie touched her lips.

"It wasn't a brotherly kiss?" Seth took a large slug of water.

"No, not brotherly. His mouth was open."

"Great, just great." Seth slammed the bottle on the table.

"Are you jealous?" Ellie laughed.

"No, no. It's not that. Sometimes he goes through these periods where he thinks he falls in love with a woman. There were some women after your brother died. But he always goes back to men and the woman gets hurt and then he starts drinking because he feels so bad about fucking up."

"I know he's gay. I'm won't fall for him." Ellie stood and laid her head on Seth's shoulder. "You really care about him, don't you?"

"Yeah, he's like my big brother, always looking out for me." Seth put his arms around her. "I want to see him happy."

Looking in Seth's eyes, Ellie saw love and compassion. "You're a good man."

"Don't tell anybody, okay? I do better as a beast." He nipped at her neck. "Would it be completely insensitive of me to put my hand up your shirt?"

Ellie shook her head. "I was kind of hoping you would."

He rubbed her stomach and slowly moved to her breasts. "God, your skin is so soft."

Ellie pulled her shirt off and yanked at his. A minute later, she was spread-eagled on the kitchen table and Seth's face was buried between her legs.

Later, much later, they made it to the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothes and puzzled animals in their wake.

Ellie rode him, moving at her own pace. Seth's hands were on her breasts as he filled her completely.

"Suck them." She bent so her breasts were at his mouth. "Wait, I can't move like this."

Seth grabbed her hips and thrust. "Allow me."

Ellie groaned as Seth suckled her breasts. He was too big, too strong, perfect. Crying out, she came again. Her body clenched around him, milking him, wanting more. Sliding down, she nuzzled his neck. Finding a particularly tender spot, she bit gently, then sucked.

"I'm going to come." Seth thrust harder, deeper.

"Come, I want to feel you spurt inside me." Ellie sat up and ground down on him. "Harder."

He stiffened and groaned as his orgasm roared through him. Ellie kissed him long and deep, loving being on top. His cock, still hard, twitched inside her. He spasmed again and wrapped his arms around her. They stayed locked together until Ellie's legs started to cramp. She slid off and curled up at his side.

"Are you okay?" Ellie asked.

"I really did die that time." He turned over and smiled.

"Did you see angels?"

"Just one." He combed fingers through her hair. "She's a redhead." There was so much tenderness in his eyes that Ellie blinked a couple of times to make sure she wasn't imagining it. He kissed her with a gentleness and care that made her heart ache. Tears welled up. "Are you crying?" he asked.

"Maybe," she mumbled and swiped her face with the sheet.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I feel like I've been cheated my whole life."

He propped his head on one hand. "How so?"

She turned away from him. If she kept looking at him, she would cry again. "It's never been like this for me." She clutched the sheet around her "Twenty years of marriage and never once like this between us. He was always in a hurry. Or he would go to sleep immediately and turn away from me."

"So you had a rotten sex life?"

"That's the kicker. I thought it was good, fine, because I didn't know any better." She flopped down on the pillow. "You wouldn't understand and that's okay."

"C'mere." He held out his arms and she put her head on his chest.

"Are we going to make love some more?"

"In a while," he murmured. "I may need a short nap."

Ellie yawned. "Nap sounds good."

Seth watched her sleep. He didn't want to tell her that sex had never been like this for him either. He prided himself on being able to satisfy his lovers. He considered sex a good time. The thought that it might be more than that with Ellie was something he didn't want to consider.

* * *

Ellie climbed the two flights of stairs to Sergio's Dance Studio. She had spent the better part of the afternoon searching for Jamie. After leaving messages at his apartment and on his cell phone, she'd gone to the restaurant he worked at and checked his apartment. The dance studio was a last resort. She worried because normally he called her. Marshall hadn't turned up either.

As she entered a tiny vestibule, the beat of Latin music filled the air. A young man reading a magazine sat behind the desk. He smiled and said hello.

"A class or a lesson?"

"Neither, I was wondering if Jamie Jordan is here. He's tall, red hair, very cute."

"Sure, he's in Studio B, second door on your left. Are you his sister?"

"No, just a friend. Thanks."

The studio was full of couples dancing the rhumba. Ellie spotted Jamie, his bright red hair a beacon. The instructor moved among the couples correcting positions and postures. She took a seat on a folding chair and waited for the song to end.

Jamie saw her at the end of the dance and waved. "What're you doing here?" He dropped into a chair beside her.

"Looking for you. Is your cell phone broken?"

"No, I got your messages and I was going to call but..."

"You look like you lost your best friend." Ellie put her arm around his slumped shoulders. "Let's go. I'll take you to dinner."

"Not hungry," he replied.

"I've seen you eat, you're always hungry." Ellie stood and pulled him to his feet. "How about pizza or a nice big corned beef sandwich?"

Jamie sighed. "I guess I could eat pizza."

"We'll have some beers too."

“Ugh, no alcohol.” Jamie picked up his bag. “Just give me a minute to change.”

* * *

They were on their third slice of pizza before Jamie told her about the weekend in the Hamptons.

“So he just left you there? No apology? No explanations?”

“Nothing, I got smashed when I saw him go off to the beach with that whore. He did it on purpose. He wanted me to see them.” Jamie swiped at his eyes with a napkin. “I still can’t believe it hurts this much.”

Ellie covered his hand with hers. “I know exactly how you feel.” The memory of Charlie kissing the skank rose vividly in her mind. “It’s a betrayal even though you haven’t been together that long. Did you have an argument or something?”

“We’d been getting along great. I thought things were going so well between us. We had fun with Norrine’s kids playing on the beach. And the sex, we took a walk on the beach on Friday night. We made love, got sand everywhere, but we didn’t care. Then when we washed off in the shower, he made love to me again. We couldn’t get enough of each other. But I thought it was more than that, more than sex. He even got all worried when I got sunburned.” Jamie pushed his half-eaten pizza away.

“There must have been something?”

“Yeah, he started acting funny when we talked about kids.”

“What about kids?”

“I want them, he doesn’t. I asked him if he and your brother wanted kids and he just freaked,” Jamie said. “Did you know your brother slept with women while he was with Marshall? What kind of a fucked-up relationship was that? I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, but your brother sounds like a selfish, self-centered bastard.”

Ellie's first reaction was to defend Kit. Then she saw the hurt on Jamie's face and stopped. She took a bite of pizza, needing a minute to think. "You grew up in New York, didn't you?"

"Yeah, Brooklyn, I told you that."

"When did you figure out you were gay?"

Jamie shrugged. "Fifteen or sixteen."

"When did you tell your folks?"

"I was seventeen when I was sure, why?"

"They were accepting, right?"

"I don't think they were surprised. Dad bought me a box of condoms and Mom asked me to bring my boyfriend for dinner."

"Did Marshall tell you his mother didn't speak to him for a year after he came out?"

"No. He never talks about his family, except his cousin Patti."

"Only Patti stuck by him." Ellie took another bite of pizza. "Buffalo used to be a very homophobic city. It's gotten better but it certainly isn't New York. I remember there was this gay bar downtown. It had a parking lot in the back that faced a fire station. So for shits and giggles the firemen would turn the fire hose on the men who came out of the bar."

"You're kidding," Jamie said.

"Nope. And when people complained, the mayor was quoted as saying the queers needed to be cooled off. Nobody did anything."

"Jerks, ignorant jerks."

"My father was one of those ignorant jerks," Ellie said. "He thought it hilarious. He had a hard life. He quit school at sixteen to help support his family. Kit meant everything to him."

Jamie nodded. "I remember when he played for the Jets. He was really good."

"Kit was under a lot of pressure, from a lot of different places, but mostly from my dad. He was always on Kit about something."

"But he succeeded."

"Daddy thought he could do better. He would call him after every game and harp on him about mistakes or why he didn't get more playing time. Daddy believed he was helping Kit."

"Jesus, and Kit didn't tell him to lay off?"

"Nope. He always craved Daddy's approval."

"What about you? Did he do the same thing to you?"

"Yes, but to a lesser degree. If I got four As and one B on my report card, he would tell me to get all As next time. If I made a cake, he would want to know why it was lopsided. I was ten when that happened."

"Wow. So nothing either of you did was good enough?"

"Yeah, except for Charlie. Daddy approved of him. It was the only approval I ever got." She took a sip of her soda. "So you can probably imagine how he would have reacted to finding out his son was gay."

"Yes, I think so."

"But Kit meant to do it anyway, because he loved Marshall that much. So before you pass judgment on Kit, or Marshall for that matter, maybe you need to step back and see the whole picture."

"What about you?" Jamie shot back. "You didn't give your husband another chance."

"True, but I've spent the last two months thinking about it, looking at the real marriage instead of the fantasy I had."

"And?"

"Well, I recently discovered that Charlie is not only a cheater, but he's also a thieving, selfish son of a bitch. Everything was about him and his needs and wants. Whatever I wanted was deemed silly or stupid, and that was when I could get him to listen."

"Wait a minute." He looked at her closely. "Is that a giant hickey?"

"Maybe." Ellie turned up her collar.

"You and Seth did it!" Jamie crowed. "Hah, I knew it." He leaned forward in his chair. "So how was it?"

"Great, unbelievable and none of your business."

“Okay, okay.” Jamie held up his hands in surrender. “No more questions.” He wrapped an arm around her neck and drew her close. “How big?”

Ellie slapped him lightly. “Men are pigs.”

“C’mon, I’ll walk you home and ask you more embarrassing questions. I’m very good at finding things out.”

“I’m just going to smile and not tell you anything,” Ellie stated firmly.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ellie, Ellie, I should have told you about me. It's all true, about Dad. I never could live up to his expectations. I was ashamed of what I was. You would have loved me anyway... Little sister, I love you.

"Hey, Ellie." Marshall knocked softly. "Are you awake?"

"Sure, come on in."

She was stretched out on the bed, the dogs at her feet. Sheba sprawled across the other pillow. Ellie put her book down and smiled at him. "Sit down." She patted the side of the bed.

"What are you reading?" He picked up the book from her lap. "The latest Stephanie Plum novel. She's a terrific character. Can I read this when you're done?"

"Sure." Ellie sat up next to him. "How are you?"

"I'm tired mostly. I've been to four meetings today and spent a couple of hours with my sponsor."

"You look a little ragged." Ellie knelt behind him on the bed and rubbed his shoulders.

"I wanted to apologize for last night." His head drooped down as Ellie moved to his neck. Her fingers loosened the knots of tension. He leaned into her. She smelled like cool air and ocean breezes. "That feels so good."

"No need for an apology. We were worried about you, is all." Ellie moved to his temples.

"Where is Seth by the way? I want to talk to him."

"At the recording studio with Jennie. They're doing new stuff for her CD."

"She's going to be big," Marshall mumbled.

"Definitely. When did you last eat?"

"Don't know. Yesterday, maybe a doughnut this morning."

"I'll make you an omelet and toast." She hopped off the bed. "Go take a shower."

"Really, you don't have to take care of me." He stood and realized he hadn't changed his clothes since his binge. His first thought upon waking was to get to a meeting and find his sponsor.

She dropped a kiss on his cheek. "I like taking care of you. Now get moving."

He felt a little better when he came into the kitchen. The food smelled good and his stomach rumbled. Ellie put the omelet in front of him along with some rye toast.

"Now eat," she ordered and took a chair across from him.

"Can I have some coffee?" he asked.

"No, you've been drinking it all day and you need to sleep." She poured him a glass of cranberry juice. "This is better."

"Okay, Mom." He smiled. "Aren't you eating anything?"

"I had pizza with Jamie earlier. I'm still full."

Marshall gulped juice and coughed. "Shit. I suppose he told you what happened."

"Some. He's in love with you. It's beyond a crush."

"He's a baby. He'll find somebody else. I'm no good for him. I don't know how to have a relationship."

"You mean you don't how to have a healthy relationship," Ellie countered. "You know how to have a sneaky back-door relationship. Like you had with my brother." She picked up a piece of toast and nibbled. "Jamie is breath of fresh air. In fact, he's a windstorm and you can't handle it." She dropped the toast. "And while you think about that, you might ask what Kit would be doing if you had died." She took his chin in

her hand and made him look at her. "I somehow doubt he would still be mooning over you." She stood and whistled for the dogs. "I'm going for a walk."

Marshall shoved his plate away. "Wait a minute, I'll go with you. You can beat me up some more."

* * *

"This will be fun." Ellie glanced at Marshall who rode shotgun in the big rented SUV. They were on the interstate on their way to the camp in the Adirondacks.

"I still think you should have taken Seth." Marshall stroked Sheba who was stretched out on his lap.

"They've got a big gig in Jersey. He's totally focused on that right now."

"And that's okay with you?"

"Sure, it's not as if we're in this for the long-term or anything."

And I have to keep telling myself that. It's a fling. I've never had a fling. Are there ground rules? Buffalo, back in less than a month and Seth will forget me. But I won't forget him. Like this morning. Did saying love while they were making love count? Seth said it in Spanish as he pushed himself inside me.

They made love with their eyes open, arms and legs intertwined. When she climaxed, he smiled down and told her she was beautiful. He stayed inside her for a long time after he came, turning them on their sides. He whispered more Spanish love words as they stroked each other. Ellie shivered. Better they would be apart for the weekend. Things were getting too intense.

"We should stop soon. Let the dogs stretch their legs," Marshall said.

Ellie glanced in the rear-view mirror. Sammy slept and Django sat up looking out the window. "Yeah, we should. I could use some coffee."

Marshall stared out the window. "I should have stayed home."

Ellie had talked him into coming. Patti and Joe would be there and she wanted CJ to meet Marshall. The boxes Patti shipped were in the back. Ellie intended to put them to good use.

"Stop kvetching. It'll be fun. Get your mind off your troubles."

"Staying at a Motel 6 will make me suicidal."

"I told you I'll stay at Motel 6. You can have my room at the lodge."

"No, no. You stay at the lodge. Motel 6 has free HBO and free coffee in the morning." He hugged Sheba. "We'll have a great time." Sheba rubbed the top of her head on his chin.

"If you made up with Jamie, you wouldn't be staying at Motel 6. Look there's a Dunkin Donuts at the next rest area." She pointed to the sign.

"And a Roy Rogers," Marshall noted. "It just doesn't get any better than this."

* * *

"What the hell? Must be a mistake." Seth stood in the large, luxurious hotel room with its spectacular view of the boardwalk and a bathroom you could park a car in. Ollie followed him in.

"Wow, man look at this." Ollie dropped his bag on one of the beds. "I'm glad the record company is paying."

"Are you sure we're in the right room?"

"Yeah, this is the place." Ollie opened his bag. "We've got a sound check in an hour." He headed to the bathroom. "I'm taking a bubble bath."

Seth chuckled and opened his own suitcase. He hung up his clothes and found a small box in the bottom of the case. In the box, there was a guitar pick with a small piece of paper under it.

Seth,

This pick was given to me by Muddy Waters. When he gave it to me, he asked me if I had a thing for guitar players. I told him I didn't know any

personally. He told me to find one. It took me twenty years, but you were worth the wait.

Knock 'em dead, baby.

Ellie

Seth held the guitar pick up to the light. He would knock them dead. It would be a great gig. The only thing missing was Ellie.

* * *

Ellie tapped on the door of her room at the lodge. She was surprised when the clerk told her that her husband had checked them in earlier. Typical, too lazy to make his own reservation he had taken hers. Well, he would have to vacate. On her credit card, after all. She pounded harder and almost fell over when a tall dark-haired woman opened the door.

"I'm sorry, I must have the wrong room," Ellie said. "I'm looking for my husband Charlie." Sammy sniffed the woman's shoes, Django took a good long whiff of her crotch. Ellie yanked both of them back.

The woman paled. "Just a minute." She closed the door. A moment later, Charlie came out.

"Hey, how's it going?" Charlie leaned on the doorway. Sammy barked and whined. "Hey, Sammy, how's the boy?" Charlie crouched down to pet the little dog.

Django took that as his cue, launched himself at Charlie and started vigorously humping him. Charlie toppled over, which made Django change his position so he could continue. Sammy gave Charlie's face a thorough tongue bath. Charlie sputtered as he tried to get both dogs off him. Ellie watched the fun for a minute. Finally, she pulled Django away.

Charlie stood and steadied himself against the wall. "What in hell is that?" He pointed to Django who hid behind Ellie's legs.

"He's a Labrador and belongs to a friend of mine. He humps anything that moves." She patted the dog's head. "I'm sure you can relate. You're in my room, you and your guest." Ellie bit the words off.

"There weren't any more rooms." Charlie shrugged. "I got here first."

"And where am I supposed to stay?"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "I don't care. Sleep with the dogs."

"Nice. Do you plan on bringing her to camp tomorrow?"

"We'll see. Cheryl's a little nervous about meeting CJ."

"Why? Wasn't she in his chemistry class?"

Charlie ignored that remark. "Why did you change all of our accounts?"

"Not all of them, only mine. What's the matter? Mad because your own personal money tree dried up?" Ellie crossed her arms. "Do you really want to do this here?"

"No, but you won't be reasonable and return my phone calls."

She opened her purse and pulled out her lawyer's business card. "Talk to her if you have questions."

Charlie read the card. "Have you retained her?"

"Yes. She's going through all the records now, along with a forensic accountant."

"I hoped to keep this between ourselves, let one of my partners handle it."

"Are you kidding me? After what you did?" Ellie shook her head. "Okay, Charlie, there's no point arguing. Take the room, enjoy yourself. I'll explain the situation to the clerk and let them bill you instead of me. Better get that credit card ready."

* * *

"Charlie brought a girlfriend," Ellie wailed as soon as Marshall opened the hotel room door. "He took my room, and he's in there with another woman."

Ellie collapsed against Marshall and sobbed loudly. Marshall hustled her and the dogs into the room and slammed the door.

Ellie fell on the bed and continued to sob. "She was in his room, my room. I made that reservation last summer. And she was in it with my husband."

Marshall sat on the edge of the bed and patted her back. "Was it the same woman you caught him with?"

"No, she was so young, so damn skinny." Ellie sat up and grabbed a tissue. "She had a great ass. I saw it when she went to get Charlie. Her ass is in my room!"

"You have a great ass, everyone says so," Marshall said.

"But it's not a young ass." Ellie sniffed. "It's so much work to maintain."

"Do you want him back?"

"Who?" Ellie asked.

"Charlie, your husband."

"No, I don't think I do."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Because, because it hurts. I gave him all of my youth and he replaces me like a burned-out light bulb."

"So, is Seth a hundred watts?"

Ellie giggled. "At least a thousand, maybe a whole new lamp." She flopped back on the bed. "It just hit me that I'm not part of a couple anymore. It's weird."

"We'll be a couple." He pulled her to a sitting position. "We're supposed to have dinner with the boys, and Joe and Patti right?"

"That's the plan, but maybe we shouldn't. I should go talk to CJ."

"Talk to CJ, for sure. But we're going to dinner. And we'll have a good time. I didn't come all the way up here to stay in this luxurious room and watch you wallow in self-pity."

"Did I mention that all the hotels are full?"

Marshall rolled his eyes. "Okay, I'll share the bed with you. But the livestock sleep on the floor."

"You snore."

"Well, you're a woman. We'll both have to deal."

* * *

"Mom, Mom, over here."

Ellie turned around and saw CJ loping toward her. A little boy about seven was hot on his heels. CJ hugged her tightly, spinning her around. "I missed you so much, Mom." The words were muffled against her shoulder.

"I missed you too, honey. You look like you've grown again." He towered over her. His arms and shoulders looked broader. His hair was burnished copper from the sun and his blue eyes sparkled. The sight of him made her tear up. Her son, her beautiful son.

"Is this your mama?" the little boy asked. He stood next to CJ, chest puffed out, beguiling chocolate eyes glued on her face.

"Yeah, Tyree, this is my mom." He crouched down to the boy's level. "You can call her Mrs. Newman. Now shake hands."

Ellie smiled and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Tyree."

Tyree grinned up and shook her hand. "Hello, Mrs. Newman." He poked CJ. "Your mama's hot."

CJ rolled his eyes and scooped up Tyree. "The word is pretty, Tyree. My mom is pretty."

"Yeah, pretty and hot." Tyree nodded vigorously.

"Okay, my man, let me talk to my mama for a while."

"You coming for the swim?" Tyree looked at CJ with hero worship in his eyes.

"Yeah, go back to the cabin and get changed." He put the boy down. He scampered off.

"Tyree likes the ladies," Ellie observed.

"He's a lot better than when he came here." CJ looped his arm around his mother's shoulder. "So how's New York?"

"I wanted to wait to tell you this, but your dad is kind of forcing it."

Ellie sat on a bench under an oak tree. Children's voices drifted through the trees. A sound of oars stroking through the water came from the lake.

CJ sat beside her. "You mean about the divorce?"

"You knew?" Ellie regarded him with surprise.

CJ nodded. "Dad told me. He was upset, you know, angry. I told him to go to New York and get you back."

"I see, did you tell him where I was?"

"I told him before I left for camp. He always knew where you were." CJ shrugged. "I figured he would bring you home."

"Well that didn't happen." Ellie put her hand on his back. "We are getting a divorce."

CJ looked at her and nodded. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"It'll be okay, honey, I don't want you to worry. We'll stay in the house. Your life won't change much."

"Dad said that too."

"There's another couple of things I want to tell you," Ellie said. "Your dad brought somebody with him."

"A girlfriend?"

"I think so. She's very pretty."

"Geez, what am I supposed to do?"

"Be polite, no smart remarks."

"Okay, but I'm going to spend most of my time with you."

"Good. There's another thing." She took a deep breath. "It's about your Uncle Kit."

* * *

They filled a large table at the restaurant. Dressed in clean blue jeans with camp T-shirts, the boys looked freshly scrubbed. Ellie sat next to Marshall and watched the teenagers feast.

"Do they always eat like this?" Marshall asked.

"Two months of camp food, they get hungry for something good."

"They ordered one of every appetizer on the menu."

"And they'll finish every one of them, their dinners, what's left of our dinners and dessert. You should see my grocery bills."

"Hey, there's Charlie," Patti said. "I wonder what high school he found her at."

"Here they come." Joe shot Patti a look. "Behave yourself."

Charlie approached the table with a snarky smile in on his face. CJ got up and hugged his father. They spoke for a moment, and then Charlie smiled at the table. "Everyone, this is my friend Cheryl." He introduced Patti, Joe and Josh. He stopped when he got to Ellie. "You've met Ellie and this is..."

"Marshall Whitmore." Marshall stood and shook both their hands. He sat down and put his arm around Ellie protectively, possessively. "Wasn't it a beautiful day?"

Charlie nodded. "Have we met?"

"I don't think so but Ellie described you perfectly."

"Cheryl, tell us, what do you do? Or haven't you picked a major yet?" Patti asked sweetly.

Cheryl smiled wanly. "I'm a paralegal." She looked at Marshall closely. "Are you Marshall Whitmore the actor?"

"Yes." Marshall ran his fingers up and down Ellie's arm.

"I just love you. You were so good on your old show. I had such a crush." She dug in her purse and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. "Can I have your autograph?"

"Sure." Marshall scrawled his signature. He got up and handed the autograph back. "It's a real pleasure to meet you." He turned on the

charm and looked deep into her eyes. He touched her cheek briefly. "A real pleasure."

Cheryl looked as if she were melting into the floor. Her gaze followed Marshall hungrily as he moved back to his seat beside Ellie.

It took two nudges from Charlie to get Cheryl to tear herself away from Marshall. "We've got to get to our table. CJ, we'll see you at breakfast."

CJ stopped chewing for a moment and nodded. "Six-thirty, Dad, and we're swimming first. The lake is great when the mist is still on it."

"Wonderful." Charlie grimaced. "Enjoy your dinners." He dragged a still befuddled Cheryl off.

"What did you just do there?" Ellie turned to Marshall.

"Mom, he made Dad look like an ass," CJ said. "I thought you were gay?"

"CJ!" she sputtered. She glared at Josh who was trying to hide his laughter in his napkin.

"What?" CJ said. "You told me he was Uncle Kit's boyfriend."

"I was his boyfriend, CJ. And I am gay." He put his arm around Ellie. "But I love your mom and your dad was deliberately trying to hurt her. So, I just made it a little easier for her."

"I'm confused," CJ groused. "How can you love Mom if you're gay?"

"There are different kinds of love," Marshall said. "Your mom has been a good friend to me. She's funny and beautiful and great to be with. I don't know what I'm going to do when she goes home. I'll miss her a lot."

"So she's your friend but you don't want to sleep with her?"

"I want to sleep with all my friends that are girls," Josh said.

"Here's our dinners," Patti cried.

"Great, I'm starving," CJ said.

"Me too. The food at camp is okay but not like this," Josh added.

"Mom, trade you some steak for a couple of ribs?" CJ eyed Ellie's plate.

"Here, just take some steak, honey." Ellie pushed her plate toward her son.

"Want some of my chicken?" Marshall offered.

"Sure, I'll take a drumstick." CJ turned his attention to his food.

"Thanks," Ellie whispered to Marshall. "I love you too."

Marshall gripped her hand under the table. "Women love me. It's the men I have trouble with."

* * *

They got back to the room late. Ellie took the dogs out for a long walk and promised them they would have lots of playmates tomorrow. When she got back, Marshall was propped up in bed, watching television.

"Get your jammies on. *Moonstruck* starts in five minutes." He pulled out a large bag of white cheddar popcorn. Django and Sammy hopped on the bed and eyed the food hopefully. Sheba slept in the recliner.

"You're perfect," Ellie said. "You're making this trip so much fun."

"Anything for you, kid."

They stayed awake for the whole movie and had a long discussion about who was their favorite Italian singer. Ellie opted for Dean Martin and Marshall held out for Al Martino.

"I'm half-Italian, so this should be my call. And I'm a trained vocalist. So it's definitely Al Martino."

"There was nobody like Dino, think of 'Return to Me', and 'Ain't Love a Kick in the Head'."

"Classics, I have to agree." Marshall nodded. "Maybe I should sing one of them to Jamie."

"Couldn't hurt." Ellie laid her head on his shoulder. "You love him."

"He probably doesn't know who Dean Martin is."

"Everybody knows who Dean Martin is." Ellie closed her eyes. "I'm exhausted."

“Go to sleep, Ellie-Belly.” He kissed the top of her head. He gently pushed her down on the pillows and covered her with the sheet. The dogs curled around her.

Marshall brushed his teeth and when he came out of the bathroom, Kit was sitting in the recliner, stroking Sheba. He was bathed in moonlight, his hair burnished copper. His long fingers moved through Sheba’s thick fur. He looked straight at Marshall and smiled.

Marshall sat down hard on the edge of the bed and blinked his eyes. “I must be having the DTs.”

“You haven’t had a drink in a few days.” Kit’s voice, soft and low.

“Brain tumor,” Marshall mumbled.

“It’s not a brain tumor.” Kit chuckled.

Marshall looked again. Kit didn’t disappear. “It’s my time then, and you came to get me.”

Kit rolled his eyes. “Geez, you get a visit from me and right away you think you’re dead.”

“You came for Ellie?”

“Nobody’s dying, okay?” Kit shimmered. “I came to talk.”

“Well, since this is a hallucination, talk to me.” Marshall was shaking.

“I love you, that’s the first thing. I didn’t say it enough. That’s why you can see me, because of your love and Ellie’s. It’s good you’re getting to know her.”

“She’s great. You never told me how terrific she is.”

“I didn’t know it myself, until after...”

“I’m angry with you,” Marshall blurted.

“Good, about time.” Kit smiled. “Move on, you’ve grieved for years.”

“I miss you, every day.”

“I know, I feel it,” Kit replied. “I don’t want you to be alone. Live your life.”

Kit stood and put the sleeping Sheba on the chair. He placed his hands on Marshall's shoulders and kissed him. Marshall reeled. If this was a hallucination, it was a good one. He reached out for Kit but touched nothing.

Chapter Twenty-three

That shouldn't have happened. He should have only dreamed me. But when he came out of the bathroom, our eyes met and he saw me. Wrong to start a conversation but I couldn't help myself. There was so much more I wanted to say to him, but there wasn't time. There never is enough time. I hope he can move on now. Marshall, I love you so much, but we both need to let go. So hard to do. I wanted to promise him I would be waiting for him when it was his time, but I don't know if that's possible.

Shit, I hate being dead.

It had to be a trick. Marshall stared out over the lake and watched Django and Ellie frolic in the water with CJ and his campers. Marshall sat on the dock and dangled his feet in the cool water. Sammy lay beside him whining softly.

"Sammy's not much of a water dog." Patti sat beside them and took the little white dog in her lap. "You look tired. Are you okay?"

"Didn't get much sleep last night. I'm not drinking if that's what you're asking."

"Yeah, it was." She gazed out over the lake. "It's amazing, isn't it, how much CJ looks like Kit?"

"Kit was taller and his eyes were a little different, but other than that..."

They spotted Charlie and his girlfriend walking along the shore.

"Why in the world did she stay with that ass for so long?" Marshall asked.

"Good question. Maybe she thought they were happy." Patti looked around. "You think anyone would notice if I lit up?"

"I would, and I would tell on you."

"Spoilsport."

"That's me. Do you believe in ghosts?" Marshall asked.

"Where did that come from?"

"Seriously, do you think it's possible?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's possible. I believe in the afterlife." She stroked Sammy's soft fur. "Why? Did you see one? Wait a minute. Did you and Ellie smoke weed?"

"Jesus, we didn't smoke anything. I could have been dreaming."

"So who did you see?"

"Kit."

"No way."

"We watched *Moonstruck*, Ellie went to sleep. I brushed my teeth and when I came out of the bathroom he was sitting in the chair petting Sheba."

"Okay, you were smoking weed." Patti put her sunglasses on her head and peered at him. "Your eyes aren't bloodshot."

Marshall grabbed Patti by the shoulders. "For the last time we didn't get high, I don't have any and I wouldn't know where to get it."

"I can get you some."

Marshall closed his eyes. "I don't even want to know."

"Did he say anything?"

"Yeah. He told me he loved me and to move on."

"Good advice. You should take it."

"Then he kissed me. It was so real, I could feel him, smell him." Marshall looked at Patti. "Maybe I need a doobie."

"You could have been dreaming. Or maybe your subconscious sent you a message." Patti waved to Ellie. "Did Ellie sleep through the whole thing?"

“Yeah, she was out like a light.”

“Oh shit. Look.” Patti pointed to the shore where Django made a beeline for Charlie. Unfortunately for Charlie he sat on the ground with his face turned up to the sun and his eyes closed. Cheryl was coming toward him with a couple of cans of soda.

“We should do something,” said Marshall.

“I wish I had my camera. Oh good, Ellie is watching.”

At that moment, Django ran out of the water and stopped to shake himself. Some of the drops hit Charlie and he opened his eyes just in time to see the large dog pounce. Django knocked him over and was soon humping away in the vicinity of Charlie’s head. Charlie’s arms flailed as he tried to get the madly humping dog off. Cheryl dropped the cans of soda and ran over. She yanked on the dog’s collar.

“Django really likes Charlie,” Patti observed.

“The dog must recognize a fellow pervert.” Marshall stood. “I better rescue Django. Wouldn’t want him to catch anything.”

“Wait. I’ll go with you.” She carefully put Sammy down.

By the time they strolled over, Cheryl had pulled the dog off Charlie. She hung on to his collar for dear life as Django buried his nose deep in her crotch. The dog looked up with love in his eyes as he sniffed appreciatively. Everyone laughed as Charlie scrambled to his feet.

“I’ll take him.” Marshall smiled down at Cheryl as he grabbed Django’s collar and dragged him away. “He means well. I can see why he really likes you.” He put his arm around Cheryl and led her to a bench with Django in tow. “You sit right here a minute, and I’ll get your sodas.”

Ellie came out of the water and whistled. Marshall let the dog go and Django loped to Ellie and looked at her adoringly as he sat at her feet. Patti walked over with Sammy.

“Nice job, fella.” Patti thumped Django on his side. “Did you plan that?”

“No,” Ellie said from underneath the towel she was using to dry her hair. “He spotted Charlie and took off before I could stop him.”

"Funny you didn't whistle for him sooner."

"I had water in my nose and one of the campers had a leg cramp so I had to help him."

"Safety first," Patti agreed. She bent down to Django. "If you do that when I have my camera, there's a steak in it for you."

Django gave them a lopsided doggy grin and thrust his nose in Patti's crotch. Both women burst out laughing.

Charlie stomped over, sputtering. "Keep that monster away from us or I'll call the dog warden and have him put down."

"Have him put down?" Ellie laughed. "For what? Felony humping? Give it a rest, Charlie. Django's sorry." She crouched down to the dog's level and put her arms around him. "Aren't you sorry?" The dog licked her cheek and cast a sidelong glance at Charlie.

"Hey, Charlie, Marshall is making sure your girlfriend is okay." Patti pointed to the bench where the two sat. Marshall had his arm around Cheryl, their heads were close as Cheryl whispered something that made Marshall laugh. "She appears to have a short attention span. Did she take her Ritalin today?"

Charlie walked off in a huff, grabbed Cheryl by the arm and led her toward the dining hall.

"I don't think this weekend is turning out like Charlie planned." Patti snickered.

"You know what I want to do?" Ellie said. "Dance around the campfire tonight and sneak some beer in."

* * *

"C'mon we're going to be late." Ellie urged Marshall along the path through the woods.

"There are million mosquitoes out here." Marshall shone his flashlight around.

"That's why I sprayed us with repellent. Now come on," Ellie commanded.

They came to a campfire ring, where several people had already gathered. Marshall saw Josh, Patti, Joe and CJ. The boys were putting the finishing touches on the pile of wood for the campfire.

The boys lit the fire and made sure it was blazing before they sat down. Ellie brought out a small folding table and covered it with a cloth. Marshall was puzzled. She put two tall candlesticks on it and bent down to a box. In the moonlight he could see her arrange trophies around the candles.

"What is she doing?" Marshall turned to Patti.

"We're having a memorial service," Patti said. "And s'mores."

He turned back and saw that Ellie had placed a large picture of Kit in the middle between the candles. She lit them and faced the little group.

"We're here tonight to honor the memory of Kit Miller." She paused. "Kit has been gone from us a while now, but the impact he made on our lives carries on." She turned to CJ. "Kit always took care of his family. Because of his generosity, CJ's can go to any college he wants. Kit loved his nephew very much." She motioned to CJ who got up and stood next to his mother.

"I don't remember Uncle Kit that well. I wish I did. Mom talks about him as if he were still around. I do remember a few things. He taught me to swim when I was really little, before I could be afraid of the water. I felt safe in the water with him. He wouldn't let me get into trouble. Because Uncle Kit taught me so well, I can teach other kids how to swim and not be afraid."

He smiled shyly at Marshall. "The other memory is of going to one of his football games. We were on the sidelines for the whole game and when it was over, Uncle Kit carried me around on his shoulders. I felt like a giant that day." CJ sat down next to Josh.

Marshall swiped at his eyes for a moment.

Patti stood up next. "I grew up around Kit. He was my first crush. All the girls followed him around. He treated me like his little sister. My best

memory of Kit has to be when he stood in as my senior prom date.” Patti started to laugh. “Joe came down with the chicken pox and I was dateless. Kit happened to be home and offered to take me. He even rented a light blue tuxedo to match my dress. When he and I walked into the dance, every girl in the room turned green with envy. I was on the arm of a god.” She grinned at them. “He treated me like a princess that night and when the prom ended, he took me to Joe’s so I could tell him all about it.” Patti smiled. “He was the best, the absolute best.”

She sat next to Joe, who put his arm around her and nuzzled her neck.

Ellie spoke next. “Kit was my brother. He was always there. Always in my life. His face is my first memory.” She closed her eyes. “I can still see it. Big round mug, red hair, bright blue eyes looking down on me.” She glanced at the picture. “He was so handsome, sometimes I couldn’t believe he was my brother. He was a good brother, always looking out for me. And when he went away to college, he called me every week, just to find out what I was doing. But the best thing Kit ever gave me was music. He taught me to appreciate great music. He took me to see Ray Charles and Stephane Grappelli and so many others. He taught me to listen with my ears and my heart.”

Marshall looked around. Patti nodded, tears streaming down her face. CJ stirred the fire. Josh looked at his sneakers.

Ellie continued. “But as great as he was to all of us, I’m mad at him. Because he never let me into the part of his life that was the most important to him. He never brought Marshall into our lives.” She turned to Marshall. “But now Marshall’s become a part of my family and unfortunately for him, he’s stuck with me.” Ellie pointed to Marshall. “Now it’s your turn. Tell us about your Kit.”

Marshall could only nod. He got up and looked at Kit’s picture.

“His smile was the first thing I noticed about him. I saw him at Patti and Joe’s wedding. He didn’t see me at first, then Ellie brought him to me and he smiled again. I fell in love.” Marshall touched the picture lightly. “Kit drew people to him, and not just because he was an athlete.

He made friends wherever he went. And once you were his friend, it was for life.”

Marshall took a deep breath and continued. “His life must have seemed perfect from the outside, but the reality was far from perfect. Kit kept a big part of himself hidden. The part he shared with me. We were lovers, companions and friends. Kit liked nothing more than listening to jazz in the little clubs in New York. He encouraged me in my career and was always there to cheer me on. He ran lines with me, even though he was terrible at it.”

Marshall picked up Kit’s picture. “We loved each other enough to forgive when things got rough. We wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. Kit wanted me to be a part of his family.” Marshall put the picture down. “Well, Kit, it’s been a long time coming but it happened. I’m part of the family.” He held his arms out to Ellie and she hugged him tight.

* * *

They talked long into the night and ate way too many s’mores. When they finally got back to the hotel room, Marshall was exhausted but light-hearted. The dogs flopped on the bed.

“I think they had too many marshmallows,” Ellie said.

“I can’t believe you did all that just for me.” Marshall wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you. It felt good to talk about him.”

“I’d do anything for you, sweetie.” She kissed his cheek. “We should sleep. It’s a long drive back.”

“We could stay a couple of days if you want. Soak up some more of the great outdoors.”

“Let’s go back to New York, I want you to make up with Jamie.”

“I’m still not over Kit.”

“I don’t think you’ll ever get over him, honey. I know I’ll always miss him. A big black hole opened up in my life when he died. For a long time,

I fell into the hole. And then one day I realized the hole would always be there, but I could walk around it. Chart another route, break the pattern.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you,” she said. “I get the bathroom first, then you rub my feet.”

* * *

Seth was sweating under the lights. Past two in the morning and they were almost through for the night. Sets in casinos were thirty minutes max. It didn't pay to have customers sit in a lounge when they should lose money at the tables. But performing this way was still exhausting at five shows per night. Seth noticed that after her first show, the lounge filled up as word spread. Jennie gave everything she had with each performance and by this time she looked a little wilted.

When they finished, they gravitated to the hotel coffee shop to eat. Jennie picked at her food. She was pale with circles under her eyes.

“You should go to bed, Jen,” Seth said. “Get some rest.”

She nodded and took a sip of water. “We need to work on that arrangement of ‘Moonglow’. I want to use it in the show.”

“Tomorrow, we'll work on it tomorrow. What made you decide to use it?”

“Ellie suggested it. It's a great song and it hasn't been done to death. We can work in a solo for you. Gives me a little break.” Jennie studied him. “I want you on the tour with us.”

“What about Russell?” Seth couldn't believe it. She was asking him to be a permanent part of her band.

“He's decided to strike out on his own. He's gotten a lot of recognition lately. It's the right time for him. It's the right time for you.” She reached across the table and took his hand. “We're good together. You're getting credit on the CD for the two cuts you worked on. We're releasing ‘Bring it

on Home to Me' as a single in October. The CD comes out in November. We need to think about the next CD."

"I'd love to tour with you." Seth's head spun. "I can't believe you're asking me." He looked at their joined hands. "You mean we're great together playing, right?"

"Of course, playing." Jennie laughed. "I know you're in love with Ellie. Anybody can see that. I like her."

"Wait. I never said I was in love."

"You don't have to." Jennie smiled at him knowingly. "Anyone with eyes can see it." She stood and kissed his cheek. "Off to bed. Close your mouth, Seth." She laughed as she walked out of the coffee shop.

Seth sat looking at his empty plate. In love? No way. Ellie was great and their sexual chemistry was off the charts. He got hard just thinking about her. He supposed he missed her. They had spoken on the phone several times over the weekend. He thought about her all the time. Getting this tour was too good to tell her over the phone. He wanted to see her face light up and kiss her until she couldn't catch her breath. Then he would lock them in his bedroom and spend the day making love to her. Ellie on the dance floor glowing, Ellie coming in from a run sweaty with her nipples poking through her shirt, Ellie lying underneath him, her arms and legs tight around him. Seth looked around, the coffee shop was almost empty. How long had he been sitting here thinking about her? He shook his head to clear it. They would head back to New York in a couple of days. He resolved not to think about Ellie again.

Chapter Twenty-four

The memorial service really got to me. It was good to be remembered. Ellie's right about charting another course. C'mon, Marsh, get it together, give it a try. Jamie loves you. Don't blow it. I want you to be happy, you have a shot at it with him.

Marshall sat on a park bench, waiting for Ellie and Jamie to complete their run. The dogs lay at his feet. Jamie was avoiding him, not returning phone calls, not coming up to the apartment for coffee with Ellie after their runs. Marshall looked down at the dogs who were crammed under the bench avoiding the sun.

"Remember, guys, this was all her idea. If it blows up, you leave with me. Got it?" He practiced over and over what he wanted to say to Jamie. Apology first, of course. Then should he grovel?

Or should he tell Jamie he wanted to start over. Maybe ask Jamie to move in. They would be alone after Ellie went home. Well, Seth would be there but the place was big enough. He didn't want Jamie to think him desperate, though he was. He put his head in his hands. He was too old for this, this stomach-clenching, heart-beating-too-fast state. Jamie would see him for a middle-aged, lonely faggot and laugh. He couldn't do it. He couldn't take the risk. Stupid idea. Better to forget the whole thing.

"Hey, thanks for taking the dogs out."

There was Ellie. Jamie stood a few feet behind. Marshall looked at Ellie pleadingly and shook his head.

"Well, I'll let you guys visit." She grabbed the leashes and took the dogs away.

Jamie looked amazing in his tank top and loose running shorts. Marshall wanted to see his eyes but they hid behind sunglasses.

"So, how have you been?" Marshall asked.

"Doing okay. You?" Jamie bent down to examine his sneaker lace.

"I'm fine."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Jamie stood and folded his arms across his chest. "I've got two more miles." He turned and started away.

Marshall watched him leave then heard someone shout, "Wait!" Had that been him? It must have been because Jamie stopped.

Marshall made himself get up and walk to Jamie. "I'm not fine," he choked out. "I feel terrible about the way I acted in the Hamptons." He touched Jamie's arm lightly. "I want to apologize and ask you to forgive me."

"Ellie said you didn't do anything with that guy."

"I didn't."

"Why?" Jamie took off his sunglasses. His blue eyes squinted in the sunshine.

"I didn't want him. I was doing it to hurt you," Marshall admitted. "I had this crazy idea you needed to be taught a lesson."

"What lesson?" Jamie's eyes never left his face.

"That you can't expect love or fidelity or respect in a gay relationship."

"Do you believe that?"

"I used to. It was my experience." Marshall took Jamie's hand. "Now I'm not sure it has to be that way."

Jamie regarded him. He squeezed Marshall's hand. "I should make this difficult for you. I should string you along, play hard to get." He grasped Marshall's other hand. "But I can't. That's what's so aggravating about you. You make it impossible to hate you. It would be so much easier if I could hate you." He looked down at their clasped hands. "I love you. And it doesn't matter that you don't feel the same way. I know I'm a substitute."

Marshall led Jamie over to the park bench and sat them both down. "You're not a substitute, at all." He kissed Jamie lingeringly. He could have kissed for hours. But he broke away because he wanted to finish what he had to say.

"I'm sorry you feel this way. If I gave you that impression, it isn't true. I was hanging on to some fantasy of what I had with Kit."

"I don't want that," Jamie said. "I want an open, honest, loving relationship that we don't keep hidden. I want to be your date for the Tony Awards. I want to be the one you kiss when you win. I want to get to know your family and I want you to meet mine."

"You could do a lot better than me," Marshall stated. "Someone younger, without so much baggage."

Jamie laughed out loud. "You are absolutely right. But the sad fact is I'm in love with you, baggage and all."

Marshall felt the tears start. "I don't know what to say."

Jamie nodded and sighed. "Too bad you don't." He touched Marshall's face. "Well, two more miles." Jamie stood.

"Wait, I thought we were talking." Marshall grabbed his hand.

"I'm done talking. I've offered you my heart, told you I love you and you don't know what to say." He shrugged. "Call me if you ever think of something." Jamie kissed him quickly and walked away.

* * *

Ellie looked out the window, watching for Marshall. When he turned the corner alone, Ellie's heart sank. She had hoped he and Jamie would resolve their differences.

She picked up her cell and called Jamie. "What happened?"

"It's over," Jamie said quietly. "I poured out my heart, left myself wide open and he just sat there."

"That can't be true."

"Yeah, it's true."

"I'm so sorry, honey."

"Me too. Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure, anything."

"Come to dinner at my parents' house tomorrow?"

"Okay, I'd like to meet your folks."

"I told them all about you, how terrific you are," Jamie said. "I was hoping Marshall would come but it's not going to happen."

"What time and what should I bring?"

"I'll pick you up at six. Anything you bring is fine. Mom's not much of a cook. She tries, but something always gets charred. Hopefully, we'll get there in time to save dinner."

"It's a date." Ellie paused. "Don't give up on him yet."

"Sure. I've got to go. My second audition for the soap is this afternoon. I need to prepare."

"Okay, talk to you later." She ended the call.

"Is he okay?" Marshall stood in the doorway, fists clenched.

"For now. His call-back is this afternoon, so he's focusing on that." Ellie crossed the room and took Marshall's hands. "Loosen up. You look like the top of your head is going to blow off."

He relaxed his fingers. "I tried to tell him but the words got stuck, they wouldn't come out. I wanted to so much." He let go of Ellie and grabbed his head. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"I'm having dinner at his parents' tomorrow, he wants you to come." Ellie said. "I think you should go."

"And do what? Say what?"

"How about 'Hello it's nice to meet you' or 'Jamie, I love you too'." Ellie started toward the kitchen. "Jamie's mother can't cook, so I'm making your grandmother's red sauce and a nice antipasti. I better make a list and we're almost out of coffee."

Marshall followed. "You can make Nonna's red sauce?"

"I watched her make it about a million times. Patti and I used to hang out there on Saturdays. Don't you remember?"

"I stayed as far away from Nonna as I could. She was the scariest woman on the face of the earth." Marshall shivered. "She terrified everybody. She was a crazy, nasty old woman."

Ellie opened cupboards and wrote on a pad of paper. "What scared you? The giant hair-growing mole or the fact she put curses on everybody?"

"Both." Marshall dug in a bottom cupboard and pulled out a large pot. "I bought this for my mother to use when she visits."

"Perfect," Ellie said. "Want to go to Zabar's with me? Do you know if they carry figs?"

"Figs? You want figs for the antipasti?"

"No, for the sauce. That was her secret ingredient."

"She told you?"

"No, I watched her. As a kid, I had the remarkable ability to become invisible."

"Does Patti know?"

"Yeah, we always make a big batch of it in the fall and store it in the freezer." Ellie gathered up her cloth shopping bags. "You coming?"

"Sure. Maybe we should take some cookies too?"

* * *

"I wonder what time Seth is getting here?" Ellie and Marshall stood in the kitchen making the red sauce.

"He didn't say," Marshall said.

"He called you?" Ellie started opening cans of Roma tomatoes.

"Yeah, last night. Their gig got extended four more nights. Seth was excited. They move right to the Blue Note after this."

"Oh, that's wonderful news."

“Didn’t he call you?”

“No, he’s probably busy.” Ellie added the tomatoes to the saucepot. “It doesn’t matter. I’m glad things are turning out so well for him.”

“He should have called you. You’re his girlfriend.”

“I’m not his girlfriend.”

Marshall put his knife down. “Well then, what are you? His sex buddy?”

“No, we’re friends, I think. But girlfriend implies a long-term connection. Which we don’t have.”

“You mean love?”

“I suppose.”

“You don’t love him?”

“I don’t and even if I did, he doesn’t love me. And in three and a half weeks, I go back to Buffalo and resume what’s left of my life. And in four weeks, I’ll be a pleasant memory for him. Django will miss me more than Seth.”

Marshall turned her around. “You’re selling yourself short. Seth is crazy about you. I can tell by the way he acts around you.”

Ellie went back to the sauce. “Then why hasn’t he called me?”

“Did you try to call him?”

“Three voice mails and he hasn’t returned one of them. Seth has a short attention span.”

* * *

“Do you think we have enough food?” Marshall asked nervously.

Ellie looked at the big picnic basket and the bags next to it. “We’re not in a third world country.”

They were in a cab on their way to Queens. Ellie called Jamie and told him to meet her at his folks’ house. Marshall acted like a cat on a hot stove. Ellie finally dragged him to the gym, where he worked off some

tension. He changed clothes several times before he finally settled on jeans and a blue shirt.

"Do I look okay?" he asked for the tenth time.

"You look great. It's only a dinner. Just be yourself." She patted his knee. "It'll be fun."

The taxi pulled up to a neat Cape Cod style house with flowerbeds and an attached garage. Two cars took up the short driveway. A billow of smoke came from the back of the house.

"Wonder if that's dinner?" Ellie got the food while Marshall paid the cab driver.

A small red-haired woman opened the door. She appeared a bit frazzled. Her blue eyes crinkled at the corners when she saw Ellie and Marshall.

"You must be Jamie's friends," she said. "I'm Abby, Jamie's mom. Come in, come in."

They entered and Abby kissed their cheeks. "It's nice to meet you both." She smiled up at Marshall. "So handsome, you are."

They stood in an entryway that held an empty coat rack and a small bench. Photographs covered the walls and ran all the way up the staircase to the second floor. The walls were painted a soft butter yellow. The living room opened to the left and the dining room to the right. The living room looked comfortable with an overstuffed sofa and chairs. A large orange cat snoozed in one of the chairs.

Ellie was about to say something when the alarm went off.

"Damn," Abby cursed as she ran to the kitchen.

Ellie and Marsh followed. When they got there, Abby was waving a dishcloth around the alarm in a vain attempt to silence it. Smoke poured out of the oven. Ellie went to the oven and turned it off. She found a pair of oven mitts and carried the burnt pan through a pair of glass doors to the patio. She set the pan on the ground and went inside. Marshall removed the battery from the alarm.

"Damn, damn, damn," Abby muttered as she turned on the kitchen fan. "Normally, my daughter-in-law is here to help, but she had to work late. And I was on the phone with one of my summer students. The poor boy is having a devil of a time learning to balance equations." She waved the dishcloth again. "Well, at least the chicken is safe. We're going to grill that. I hope there's enough. My grandsons are coming. In fact they'll be here soon. My husband and sons went to their baseball game."

"Abby, does your family like pasta?" Ellie asked.

"They love it. That blackened thing was supposed to be baked ziti."

"We brought homemade red sauce with us and fresh linguini and some other things. Why don't you and Marshall get that started and I'll see to the grill."

Abby's face lit up. "You two must be angels."

"Far from it, the recipe is my grandmother's and I'm pretty sure she was in league with the devil." Marshall snorted. He went to get the food.

Thirty minutes later, Ellie had the grill hot and ready. The briquettes were developing a fine coating of white ash. She had gone into the kitchen twice and both times found Abby and Marshall deep in conversation. She could smell the sauce as it heated on the stove. As she spread out the briquettes, Jamie walked into the tiny backyard.

"It was terrible of you guys to leave your poor mother with all the work," she chided.

"Nice to see you too." Jamie engulfed her in a hug. "The game went into extra innings." He sniffed. "Do I smell your red sauce?"

"Who's that fooling with my grill?" A man's deep voice boomed. Ellie turned to see two tall redheaded men coming into the yard from the side gate. They could only be Jamie's brother and father.

"Dad, Tommy, this is my friend Ellie Newman." He grasped Ellie around the waist and drew her forward. "Ellie, this is my dad Tom and my brother Tommy."

"Wow, another carrot top. Where'd you find her, Jamie?" Tommy held out his hand. "Are you a long-lost sister?"

"No, I don't think so." Ellie laughed.

Tom inspected her work "Well, Ellie, you know your way around a grill." He shook her hand warmly. "This is a man's work, so I'll take over now. But you can help. Grilling is hard work and it requires some soothing liquid to ease the burden. How would you feel about a martini?"

"You read my mind," Ellie said.

Just then Marshall walked onto the patio with the giant antipasti they had prepared. Jamie's jaw dropped in shock. Marshall put the platter of food on the table and turned to the group. It was then that everyone noticed he was wearing a red apron that said "Kiss the Cook".

"This must be your young man, Jamie." Tom held out his hand.

"I want a martini," Jamie croaked. "A big one."

* * *

Marshall shoved the food around his plate, too busy watching Jamie and his family. They were joined by Jamie's sister, Sharon and his sister-in-law, Ginger. The two women greeted him somewhat coolly. Sharon looked like an Amazon warrior princess. Her handshake was bone crushing. She shot him a look that clearly said, "Don't fuck with my brother."

Ginger, a tiny Hispanic woman, was less subtle. She kissed his cheek lightly and whispered, "You break his heart and I'll break you."

She smiled at him sweetly and took a seat between her strapping teenage boys, Miguel and Manny. Her husband looked at her with total adoration. The women ruled the roost here and the men were completely oblivious to it. It was clear they adored Jamie.

Ellie sat across from him. He had never seen so many redheads together in the same place. She and Sharon were laughing. Everyone devoured the food and teased Abby about her cooking. Marshall made some conversation but his eyes kept wandering to Jamie. He was so at ease with his family. They accepted and loved him without reservation. This was what Jamie was offering him, love, acceptance, a family.

Jamie smiled at him for the first time that evening and Marshall's heart sped up. Then a voice—Kit's? Ellie's? his own?—shouted in his head. *He's it, he's the one. Don't blow it. Get him before he gets away.* Marshall blinked once, twice. Jamie was still grinning at him.

"Marry me," Marshall blurted.

"What did you say?" Jamie said.

"Marry me." He reached his hand across the table and took Jamie's. "I love you. I want us to be together, marry me."

"Same-sex marriages aren't legal in New York," Manny put in helpfully. "But you could go to Vermont and be domestic partners."

Ginger put her hand over her son's mouth. "Shut up."

Marshall stood and walked to the other side of the table. He drew Jamie to his feet. The whole table was silent. The only sounds were the bug zapper and distant traffic. "I love you. I'm sorry I never said it before. I'm sorry I hurt you. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. And if you want to have ten kids that's fine with me."

"You finally have something to say," Jamie gasped in wonder. "Have you been in Dad's martinis?" Jamie's arms crept around Marshall.

"No, I haven't. This isn't booze talking or loneliness or a memory. This is me. I love you. I need you. Marry me."

Jamie's eyes welled up with tears. "Okay."

They kissed and Marshall felt his heart open and fill with joy. A chorus of congratulations echoed. Marshall was hugged and kissed by Jamie's family and Ellie. The women cried and even Jamie's dad got a little misty.

"Is there any more of this linguini stuff?" Miguel held out his empty plate. "It's really good. Who made it?"

Chapter Twenty-five

My love has moved on, but I'm still here. It has to be something else keeping me. Can't figure it out. Well, there must be a reason. I wish I could have given him what Jamie will.

My baby sister is in love, really in love. Didn't figure on that happening. She's fighting it though.

Ellie lay awake listening to the sounds of the night. The city noise had bothered her when she first arrived. But now it was a kind of music, a background that was always there, always different.

She finally got up, turned on her computer and donned her headphones. The noises coming from Marshall's room had quieted. Thrilled for her friends, she hoped they would find joy in each other. They deserved it. She scanned websites, aimlessly searching. She read her emails, answered a couple of them and sent some completed work to her boss. She would go back to her job soon, get CJ settled into his senior year of high school. There would be college applications to fill out and schools to visit. She had to go through the death of her marriage. The hardest thing to deal with. Charlie would be as difficult as possible. She gazed out the window and watched the lights. Django was curled up on the floor, nestled in Seth's T-shirt. He dragged it out from under the bed and had been sleeping on it ever since. Poor dog missed him. Django sighed deeply. His big brown eyes rested on Ellie. He got up and put his head in Ellie's lap. She scratched him and rubbed her knuckles on the insides of his ears.

"I miss him too, sweetie." She found herself sliding to the floor and leaning on Django as her tears fell. Django sat tall and straight and let her cry.

* * *

Seth climbed out of the cab and grabbed his suitcase and guitars. A pleasure to take a cab rather than the subway. A greater pleasure to be able to afford it. Having a few bucks in his pocket made life a lot easier. He walked into the lobby and tipped Jesus the doorman to carry his bags upstairs. Django slammed his way into the hall and greeted him enthusiastically. Sammy followed and waved his paws.

After greeting both dogs, Seth went to the kitchen and found Ellie dressed in running clothes.

"Hey, Seth, how was Atlantic City?" Ellie asked.

"It was good, really good. Everything went fine. The hotel was unbelievable, the people were really into us. How's it going?" He winced as soon as the words came out of his mouth. *How's it going? That's how he greeted her?* She looked so cute in her running clothes with her red hair tied up in a ponytail. He crossed the room and took her in his arms.

"Everything is fine. Marshall and I had a great time at camp. We got really close, you know? He did keep me awake though, the guy can snore." Ellie put her arms around Seth and hugged him. "It's good to see you. I'm glad things went well."

"I missed you. You should have been there with me." Seth kissed her neck. Where had that come from? He was planning on keeping it light and easy and the second sentence out of his mouth was "I missed you"? *Get a grip.* Ellie nestled in his arms. She smelled like flowers. Was it her shampoo or the lotion she used or maybe just her? He closed his eyes and sniffed again. So good to be home.

"Could you loosen up a bit? I can't breathe." Her voice was muffled against his chest.

"Sorry. Is this better?" He let her move away a little.

She stared into his eyes. "You look terrific."

"Did you miss me?" He drew her close again. *What the hell? How needy did that come off?* But he wanted her to miss him, and to say it.

She kissed him lightly. "Sure I did. It was too quiet around here. I missed your playing."

"That's all?" he asked. "That's all you missed?" Okay, this was getting ridiculous. He sounded like all his old girlfriends. It had to stop now. "Never mind." He shook his head. "I'm beat, I think I'll take a shower and get some sleep."

"Sounds like a good idea." Ellie nodded. "I'm going for my run." She kissed him again and took off.

He was making a sandwich when Marshall wandered into the kitchen.

"When did you get back?" Marshall smiled at him dreamily.

"Ten minutes ago. Are you on the sauce again? You look funny."

"I'm not drinking." He poured himself some coffee. He sat at the kitchen table. "I'm getting married. I'm in love. It feels amazing."

Seth sat at the kitchen table. Marshall getting married? What had happened while he was gone? Was that why Ellie was acting so strangely? Had she and Marshall gotten together? He must have worked his magic on her. Marshall could be devastating with women, utterly charming and loving. Ellie was vulnerable, sweet and she and Marshall really got along well. Good grief, the man was wandering into straight land again. And how did she know he snored? Where exactly was she sleeping?

"Aren't you going to congratulate me?" Marshall asked. "Aren't you happy for me?"

"Yeah I'm happy, of course, but are you sure? You haven't known each other long."

"We're going to have a long engagement, live together, and then do it. We talked last night. A summer wedding, maybe on the beach." Marshall smiled. "Will you be my best man?"

“Wait a minute, what are you going to do about sex? How are you going to work that out? Aren’t you going to be tempted to, you know, cheat?”

“Why would I cheat? The sex is fantastic, the best I’ve had in my life. It means so much more when you’re in love.”

“You had sex?” Seth stood and clenched his fists. He started toward Marshall.

“Yes, and it’s great,” Marshall said. “Why is your face so red? What is the matter with you?”

Seth realized he had no claim on Ellie. She was free to make her own choices and if she wanted to try it with Marshall, he couldn’t stop her. He’d screwed it up again. Marshall saw a good thing and grabbed it. Seth relaxed his fists and went back to the table. “Just exhausted.” He picked up his sandwich. “Congratulations, I’m going to catch some sleep. See you later.”

* * *

Ellie found Jamie on the running path. He slowed and let Ellie set the pace. After she warmed up, they completed their laps around the reservoir. They did their cool down and finally flopped on the grass.

“You look positively giddy.” Ellie poked Jamie. “It suits you.”

“He’s perfect,” Jamie said. “I’ll be a good partner for him. I’ll make him happy.”

Ellie sat up and looked at the sky. “You two make a lovely couple. I really like your family. They’re very accepting.”

“They can be a little overwhelming. I never thanked you for saving dinner. Ginger says the boys still rave about your sauce.”

“Anytime. It was a lot of fun.”

“You seem kind of down. I thought you would perk up when Seth got back.”

“I am happy to see him. I just have a lot on my mind right now.”

"I'll bet he was happy to see you."

"I guess. He's on a roll right now. Just like you and Marshall." She squinted at Jamie. "And it's wonderful for all of you. And I have to go back to Buffalo in three weeks, back to my boring job and my boring house and my divorce. I can hardly wait."

"And your son," Jamie reminded her.

"If it wasn't for him, I don't think I'd go back."

"Really? Where would you go?" Jamie rolled on to his stomach.

"I'd probably stay here and annoy you and Marshall for as long as you would put up with me."

"I would love that, but you need to do something productive, something that uses your brain. And I don't mean technical writing." He snapped his fingers. "Didn't you want to be a vet?"

"When I was twelve."

"But didn't you plan to be a vet after Charlie finished law school?"

"A little thing named CJ came along."

"So you changed your mind?"

"I can't go now. I'm almost thirty-nine for crying out loud. Even if I could get in, I'd have to take some courses first and the GRE and the competition is really tough. Plus they want you to have experience working with animals."

"Whoa, slow down. How do you know all this?"

"I did some surfing on the internet. Checked out a couple of schools."

"You do want to be a vet."

"It's what I always wanted, when I had time to think about it. But even if I got in, like next year say, I would be forty-three when I graduated."

"You're going to be forty-three anyway."

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks for pointing that out, Captain Obvious."

Jamie jumped up and hauled her to her feet. "Let's get some bagels at Zabar's. I'm starving."

"Did you bring money?"

"I did." He pulled two twenties out of his pocket. "My treat."

* * *

The sound of Jennie's voice filled the apartment. Ellie and Jamie saw her and Marshall sitting at the piano. Jennie sang "You Send Me" while Marshall accompanied her.

"Hey, Ellie." Jennie got up and hugged her. "It's so good to see you." She let Ellie go and turned to Jamie. "You must be Jamie. Marshall's told me all about you." She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

"Jennie came looking for Seth and found me," Marshall said. "We were just fooling around waiting for you guys. Are those bagels?" He pointed to the bag in Ellie's hand.

"Yes, bagels and cream cheese. Where is Seth? I thought he was going to sleep."

"That's what he said, but he must have gone out. Django's gone too." Marshall took the bag out of Ellie's hand and kissed Jamie. "I'll make some coffee and we'll have a visit. I want to hear all about Atlantic City."

They were in the kitchen feasting when Jamie's cell rang. He took the call and nodded as a wide grin spread across his face. He pulled Marshall to his feet. "I got the part in the soap. They're sending Norrine the contract. I'm a working actor, I'm going to be on national television." He and Marshall hugged each other tight.

"We need to celebrate," Marshall said. Ellie nodded in agreement.

"Let's go out dancing tonight." Jamie wiggled his hips. "To that salsa club. You come too, Jennie. We'll dance all night."

"Sounds good, but I don't want to horn in on your celebration," Jennie replied.

"You're not horning in. We want you there," Ellie assured her.

"Okay, but you all have to be at the Blue Note. We're trying out the act for the road. We added new stuff and moved some things around. Seth worked really hard on the arrangements."

"When is Russell starting?" Ellie asked.

"Oh, that's the best part. Russell is doing his own tour. So Seth is going with us. It really works out for everyone. Seth is so good and we play so well together. It makes everything a lot less stressful for me." She looked at Ellie. "Didn't he tell you?"

"No, but we really haven't talked much lately," Ellie replied. "I'll bet he's flying."

"Hey, I'm going to call the family. Maybe we can get them out of Brooklyn for the night." Jamie jumped up and grabbed his bagel. "My sister will come for sure." He walked out of the kitchen.

"I have a wardrobe fitting," Jennie said. "Thanks for the bagels."

Ellie gave Jennie directions to the club and told her she would call her with the time. The two women hugged and Jennie left.

"So why did she really come here?" Ellie asked Marshall when she returned to the kitchen.

"I think she wanted to see you and Seth," he said. "Jennie may have a crush on our boy."

"Well, they're perfect for each other, and they'll be traveling together so it'll work out well." Ellie stuffed leftover bagels into a Ziploc bag. "They're obsessed with music, beautiful and talented. They'll have beautiful, talented children and a fabulous successful life. I couldn't be happier." She plastered a big smile on her face and stomped out of the kitchen.

"What's all the shrieking about?" Jamie asked.

Marshall shook his head. "Straights are beyond my comprehension." He held out his arms. "I haven't kissed you in at least an hour.

"It has been an eternity." Jamie sighed.

* * *

Now completely exhausted, Seth had spent two hours in the park with Django and then shared a big corned beef sandwich with his dog. Seth's stomach hurt from trying to digest that Ellie and Marshall were engaged and had slept together. He shouldn't have gone to Atlantic City. He should have known when Marshall kissed her that night he got drunk. Completely twisted, Marshall would hurt Ellie, and himself.

And it hit Seth. He loved Ellie. Loved her, wanted to be with her always. No way he could stay and watch the travesty unfold.

He would get his stuff and crash at Ollie's until the tour. He opened the door to the apartment and saw Marshall and Jamie kissing in the hallway.

"What the fuck?" Seth cried. "What are you doing?"

Django ran to Ellie's room and nosed the door open. She came out. "What's all the shouting about?"

"Look, they were just playing tonsil hockey," Seth said.

"So?" Ellie asked in puzzled voice.

"What is going on with you?" Marshall asked. "You've been acting weird since you got home."

Seth stared at all of them. "You're supposed to be engaged to Ellie." He stopped and took a good look. Marshall and Jamie stood close together arms looped around each other's waists. It hit him all at once.

Ellie had her hand over mouth as her sides shook. "You thought that Marshall and I were..." She laughed so hard she slid down the wall to the floor. As they realized Seth's mistake, Marshall and Jamie cracked up too.

"You never said Jamie, you just said you were engaged," Seth grumbled. "And I thought you were going on one of your adventures into straight land."

Marshall wiped his streaming eyes. "I didn't say Jamie, but why in the world would you think..." He continued to giggle.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter.” Ellie put her arms around Seth and kissed his ear. “You look tired.” She led him to his bedroom. “I’ll tuck you in.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Wow, this is too good. Seth is in love with Ellie. Okay, now I have to stick around. I want to see how this works out. Seth may be the guy for her. But Ellie needs something of her own. I hope she doesn't forget that.

Ellie was amazed. Seth was jealous, actually jealous. He came back into the room fresh from his shower, a towel tied low around his hips. She sat on the bed waiting for him. The air conditioner hummed and the room was cool and shadowed.

"You must think I'm an idiot." He fell on the bed.

"No, it was an honest mistake and it's kind of flattering that you would care that much." She kissed him lightly. "Turn over I'll rub your back."

He groaned as her fingers kneaded the muscles of his back. "You have magic hands."

"So tell me about the tour."

"Shit, I wanted to tell you myself. How did you find out?" He turned over and pulled her down so she lay on his chest.

"Jennie stopped by to see you."

"That's funny. I wonder why she came over?"

"She and Marshall got along well. They were singing when we got back from our run. When does the tour start?"

"Right after Labor Day. We open in Los Angeles, then up and down the coast for a month, Denver after that. We're opening for Michael Bublé in Chicago. That'll be a big venue. And we're going to do a duet for Jennie and Michael. I've worked up a few songs."

"Like what?"

"Let's talk later." He kissed her long and deep. "I really missed you."

She tugged her shirt off and rubbed her breasts on his chest. "I thought you were tired?" she teased.

"Shut up." He kissed her neck. "I want to love you."

* * *

Ellie was on a cloud. She and Seth were dancing. They'd made love most of the afternoon and she glowed. Seth had been tender, sweet and demanding all at the same time. He finally fell asleep around five but had insisted on joining the party. Jamie's sister and parents came along with Jennie. They had a large table in the back and people took turns buying drinks.

"You should dance with Jennie," Ellie said.

"Why? Marsh and Jamie seem to be keeping her busy." He pulled her closer and kissed her shoulder. "I only want to dance with you."

"Works for me."

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"About the same time your tour starts. Maybe a day or two before."

"I don't want you to go."

"I have to go home. You know that." She pulled back. "But it's nice to know that you want me to stay. Besides, you're leaving too and our newly engaged couple doesn't need us underfoot." He still frowned. "Let's go talk for a minute." She pulled him off the floor into a corner. "Remember this, from the first time we were here?"

"Yeah, you were fighting with me and I was so hot for you I could barely walk." He played with the neckline of her red dress. "I really love this dress."

"You do remember." Ellie laughed. "You told me that night how things would be if I were your wife." She saw the "deer in the headlights" look on

his face. "Calm down, I don't want to get married. But you really made me think about my marriage and how I'd been living half a life."

"Is this supposed to make me feel better about you leaving?"

"I don't want to fight with you. I want us to enjoy the time we have together." She kissed him softly. "Take me home, I want to make love to you."

"Ellie, Ellie, you're amazing." Seth kissed her nose. "Let's get out of here."

Later that night, Ellie watched Seth sleep. Moonlight fell on his body making him look like a sculpture. He was smiling, lying on his side, one arm pillowing his head. Ellie lay next to him, their heads on the same pillow. She counted the number of nights they had left. It wasn't enough but it would have to do.

"I love you," she whispered right before she fell asleep. Seth's smile grew wider.

* * *

"Are you sure you can't stay for a couple more weeks?" Marshall asked as he and Ellie put the last of the red sauce in the freezer. "Can't Patti take care of CJ?"

"No, she can't," Ellie said firmly. "I miss him. I want to be home with him."

"Yeah, I understand. I don't like it but I understand." He took the big pot over to the sink and washed it. "When are you leaving?"

"Day after tomorrow. I rented a car." She wiped down the counters.

"I thought Patti was coming?"

"She and Joe are picking up the boys. I wanted to get home before CJ."

Marshall dried his wet hands. "We'll miss you."

"Ditto," she replied. "When is Jamie moving in?" Jamie was there most of the time anyway. More and more of his things appeared in the apartment.

"Soon, right after Seth leaves." He looked around the kitchen. "We're on for dinner tonight, right?"

"Yes. Seth will meet us at the restaurant. He was still with the wardrobe guy. They want him to swing his hair while he plays."

"Why?"

"It looks sexy. The fiddler in Shania Twain's band did it."

"Seth must just love that."

Ellie giggled. "He did talk about getting a crew cut."

"Life is full of compromises. Like you going home. Do you need any help packing?"

"No, I'm all set." She looked out the kitchen window. "I registered to take the GRE next month."

"What's that?"

"The graduate record exam. I need it to apply to Cornell."

"What's at Cornell?" Marshall's curiosity was piqued.

"Only the best veterinary college in the country." She turned to him. "I'm applying for next fall."

"That's great. You're a natural with animals. Look how well Sheba is doing, all because of you."

"It takes a lot more to get into Cornell. You need a high grade point average, experience working with animals, letters of recommendation, a knock-them-dead essay. And let's not forget my age."

"Piece of cake," Marshall said. "Have you told Seth yet?"

"I've tried to a couple of times but he gets all weird when I talk about going home."

"He doesn't want you to go," he replied.

"Well, he's leaving too. Does he expect me to stay home and wait for him?"

"He doesn't know what he wants. You've confused him."

"Come on, he's still obsessed with playing. Whoever is with him is always going to be second."

"And you want to be first," Marshall said.

"Crazy, I know but that's how I feel." Ellie shrugged. "It's my turn, Marshall, my dream."

* * *

Seth had found a way to keep Ellie with him on tour. After a long conversation with Jennie and her tour manager, they decided to offer the job of Jennie's assistant. Lousy money sure, but they could be together. Now he had to convince Ellie it was the right thing. His biggest obstacle was her son. But the kid was almost eighteen. He could live with his father. And he would fly Ellie home whenever she wanted to see the kid.

For the first time in his life, he was in love. They belonged together. It didn't matter that she was older. He intended to hang on to her.

Everyone else was at the restaurant when he got there. Ellie looked amazing, clad in a pale blue dress. Her skin glowed and her red hair was caught up in combs, a few tendrils falling down her neck. Her face lit up when she saw him and she gestured to the chair next to her.

"Give me a kiss," she ordered. He obliged and squeezed her thigh under the table.

"You look hot," he whispered.

"I let Marshall pick this dress out." She grinned. "You don't think it's too much?"

"Well." He glanced over. Marshall and Jamie were deep in conversation. "It is too much. Every man in this place is staring at you."

"No, they aren't. Just you. How was the wardrobe fitting?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "They want me to wear my hair loose when we perform. They also want me to swing it around a little."

Ellie giggled. "That should be pretty interesting. I wish I could see it."

He was about to tell her that she could but the waiter came to take their orders. Better to wait until they were alone.

Later that evening, they took the dogs for a long walk. Marshall and Jamie were out clubbing. The night air had lost some of the humidity and the breeze cooled things a bit. They walked hand in hand, the dogs beside them sniffing the grass. They returned to the apartment after midnight.

"Let's sit in the living room for a minute," Seth suggested. "I want to talk before we get too distracted."

"Okay," Ellie agreed. "But we could get distracted on the couch you know."

"Shh, this is serious." He took her hands between his. "I want you to come with me on the tour."

Ellie opened her mouth but Seth put his fingers to her lips. "Hear me out."

He looked in her eyes. "I love you, Ellie. I never thought I would say this to anyone. I want us to be together and I've found a way we can do it."

Seth told her about the job, that they could travel together and that she could go home to see CJ whenever she wanted. He kept hold of her hands the whole time he was talking.

He finally finished and kissed her. "So what do you think? It'll be great. We'll see the whole country."

She just stared openmouthed. He got a little nervous when she didn't speak so he continued on about the cities they would visit. Finally he couldn't stand it anymore. "Say something."

"You love me?"

"Yes, I do," he declared.

Speechless, Ellie looked down at their clasped hands. Seth loved her. They weren't supposed to fall in love, at least he wasn't. She had fallen for him the first morning he made her breakfast.

"I love you too," she said slowly. "I wish we could do this, but—"

"I just told you how we can do this," he interrupted. "I know you don't want to leave your kid—"

"CJ, his name is Charles James, but we call him CJ."

"Okay, CJ. But he's almost out of the house anyway and there's no reason he can't stay with your husband. You can go home to see him as much as you need."

He hasn't been listening to me. All the time I've told him about CJ and he doesn't even remember his name. Why he was so clueless about her? Before she could get a coherent thought, Seth was talking again.

"I need you with me. I need to see your face in the audience when we play. You're my anchor. I play better when you're there." He kissed her hands. "You're the first woman who understands me. You get me, my need to play."

"I do understand you." She pulled away. "But you don't have a clue about me, about what I want." He started to speak but she held up her hand. "It's not your fault, it's mine. I've never told you. I couldn't leave CJ. If you really knew me, you would know that."

"Well, maybe you could travel with me one week and stay home the next. I'll talk to Jennie. Maybe you could work part-time for her."

"Seth, it's not just CJ. I'm not even divorced yet. There are things I want that you don't even know about."

"Like what? That boring job you hate? Buffalo? Your husband?" He bounded to his feet and paced. "I'm offering you a life here."

Ellie's heart sped up and she saw red. "A life? As what? Your cheerleader? Or as the chief gofer for a twenty-two-year-old girl? I'm way too old to be a groupie."

"I thought you loved me. I thought you wanted us to be together."

"There's more to it than that. I have dreams too."

"Okay, tell me." He crouched down in front of her. "Tell me."

"I want to be a vet. It's what I've always wanted. And if I'm ever going to do it, it has to be now."

"Vet school? Now?"

"No. Next year, if I get in. I need to take a couple of courses and do some other things. This year is to get ready. Once CJ is in college, I'll be able to go. If I'm accepted."

"So this is a pipe dream? You don't even know if it's possible?"

"It's not a pipe dream."

"Then why am I hearing about this now? You never mentioned it before."

"I told you I wanted to be a vet the first time we had a civilized conversation." She pushed his hands away and stood. "And since then all we've talked about when we weren't having sex was you. You and your music. You never asked me what I was going to do when the summer ended." She poked at his chest. "And if you really knew me, Seth Viera, you would know that I wouldn't leave my son."

"You left him all summer."

"He was at camp, you idiot, working with kids from the inner city. His choice."

"I didn't ask because at first I didn't want to think about you leaving," Seth admitted. "I didn't want to face the fact that I loved you." He reached out. "I'm sorry."

"You understand?"

"Sure I do," he said. "I hate it, but I understand. My dad never went on the road when I was young. He had lots of opportunities, but I came first. Just like a child should. I have a hard time thinking of you as a mom. But it's a big part of you. I should have realized. Our timing sucks."

Ellie nestled in his arms. "I wish it could be different."

"I'll come back to Buffalo with you. Who needs the tour? I'll bet I could get some gigs there."

"You're kidding, right?" Ellie pulled back to look at him. "You can't. I won't let you. This is too big a step for you and you can't let Jennie and the guys down."

“So I let you down instead?” Seth’s eyes were tearing.

“You haven’t let me down, not once. Sometimes I think I’ll miss you so much I won’t be able to stand it. But as long as you’re doing what you love, what you were born to do, it makes it easier.”

“So where does that leave us?” Seth looked into her eyes.

“With two nights and a day.” She kissed him deeply, giving everything she had.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I'm so proud of my sister. She's found her lost dream. And she'll make it, because once she decides to do something, nothing stops her. Wish she could have Seth too. But you never know, things change, life takes unexpected turns.

Jamie closed the trunk of the rental car. "That's everything. Including the cooler of food from Zabar's."

"Thanks, Jamie." Ellie crouched down and put Sammy into the car. Marshall and Seth stood on the curb. Seth held Django's leash.

"Are you sure about this?" Ellie asked Seth.

"He'll be better off with you." He pulled her in for another kiss. "Django loves you almost as much as I do."

Ellie nodded and put Django in the back seat with Sammy. Seth hugged and thumped the dog through the open door and admonished him to be good.

"I better hit the road." Ellie hugged and kissed Marshall and Jamie. "You're coming to Buffalo for Thanksgiving right?"

"Yes, we'll be there," Marshall promised. He smiled down at her. "Thanks for everything. Call me when you get home, otherwise I'll worry. Love you, Ellie-Belly."

"Ditto," said Jamie. "Keep running." He took Marshall's hand. "Let's give them some space." They walked into the apartment building.

Ellie wrapped her arms around Seth. "There's so much I want to say, but I can't seem to think of anything, except that I'll miss you."

"How about I love you?"

"I'll always love you. This has been the best summer of my life because of you."

"You're making it sound like it's over."

"It is."

"Summer is over, but we aren't. Not by a long shot." He kissed her nose. "You're not getting rid of me so easily."

He kissed her long and deep, running his hands through her hair and over her body. Ellie grew dizzy and she pressed closer.

Seth broke the kiss and slapped her butt playfully. "Get in the car before I kidnap you."

She nodded as tears spilled down her cheeks. "I didn't think it would be this hard to say goodbye."

Seth opened the car door and helped her in. "It isn't goodbye. It's not over, Ellie, believe me." He shut the door and leaned in the window. "Now buckle your seatbelt and go do what you have to do." He kissed her again. "I'll see you soon."

Ellie drove down the street and watched Seth get smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror. She knew it was over and Seth would come to realize that too. Django put his head on her shoulder and licked her tears away.

* * *

The house looked a little forlorn. The grass was cut and the bushes trimmed but it had an empty, neglected look. The blinds were drawn, making it impossible to see inside. Her car was parked on the driveway. She let the dogs sniff around and relieve themselves. Ellie got the front door open and for a minute thought she stood in the wrong house. Her footsteps echoed because the house was empty of furniture. The dogs trotted in and ran around. The sounds of their nails clicking on the floors and the jingle of their collars sounded everywhere. Charlie had taken everything. Ellie walked through to the kitchen and noted the missing

refrigerator and stove along with the washer and dryer. He'd even taken the coffee maker and toaster.

She opened the cupboards. A few mismatched dishes and plastic cups remained along with some canned goods.

Unbelievable. He had completely cleaned out their house. She went upstairs to their bedroom to find all the furniture gone. The clothes from her dresser were thrown in boxes on the floor. She ran to CJ's room and breathed a sigh of relief. It was untouched.

"Looks like we're camping for a while, guys," she said. The dogs hopped on CJ's bed.

As she walked through her empty house, she realized Charlie had done her a huge favor. By taking everything, he had left her with open space and freedom. Freedom to buy what she wanted, freedom to decorate any way she chose. All of her old things had vanished and she now had a chance to start fresh.

CJ was due home tomorrow. She would see how much she could accomplish.

* * *

"You changed the locks?" Frannie asked.

"Yes, and it cost a fortune. I had the garage door opener reset too."

"Good, we're serving him with divorce papers." Frannie sounded angry. "Do you want your furniture back?"

"Truthfully, no." Ellie had purchased appliances, a bed, a kitchen table and chairs, an overstuffed sofa and, much to CJ's delight, a fifty-two-inch flat screen TV. She got it all in the week she had been home. "Most of it was old and beat up. It's a relief to have it gone."

"Okay, but don't tell him. Maybe we can use this."

"I just want this to be over," Ellie said.

"I know. Can you come in now? I've got the report from the accountant."

“On my way. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“But where did the money go?” Ellie asked. They had just gone over the report. Charlie had systematically taken money out of the trust they had set up to manage her inheritance.

“Probably to pay for all his extracurricular activities,” Frannie said. “Look, if you want this over fast, there’s a way to do it.”

“Tell me.”

* * *

“How you doing, fella?” Ellie patted the boxer coming out of the anesthesia. “Tough day, I know.” She loved her new job as a vet assistant at the emergency clinic. She worked nights and weekends. The work was interesting and sometimes difficult. It made her sure that she wanted to be a vet.

Ellie checked the dog’s IV and looked at his eyes. He was lucky to be alive. His panicked owners had brought him to the emergency clinic after he was hit by a car. Fortunately it was only a broken leg and some stitches. The biggest danger now was shock, so Ellie kept a close eye on him. It looked to be a good night. She went back to her desk and set the computer up to take another practice GRE. The radio was tuned to the *Prairie Home Companion*. Garrison Keilor’s reedy tenor was a perfect backdrop for test-taking.

She was working out a math problem when the opening chords of “Moonglow” caught her attention. When Jennie’s voice came through the radio, Ellie dropped her pencil and sat back to listen. And when Seth played, she closed her eyes and smiled. Heaven.

Later in the show Jennie and the band played two more tunes from her CD. The audience loved them and when Jennie bantered with the host, she sounded assured and at ease.

“Please do another one for us,” Garrison asked.

"Sure. This is a new tune written by our band leader, Seth Viera. It's an instrumental right now, mostly because Seth hasn't written lyrics yet." The audience laughed. "I'm on piano for this."

"Does it have a title?" Garrison asked.

"Yes, it's called 'Ellie's Dream'," Jennie replied.

"And who is Ellie?"

"Seth's girlfriend. This one's for you, Ellie."

Ellie sat straight in her chair and turned the volume up.

* * *

"I can't move," Jamie groaned. "Kill me, kill me now. But let me unbuckle my pants first."

"Want some Tums?" Ellie asked from her prone position on the floor.

"Tums aren't going to help." Marshall walked in from Ellie's kitchen with tall glasses of ginger ale for them. "Time, a lot of burping, and a massive—"

"Stop." Ellie held out her hand for the drink. "We get the idea."

"Your mother must have cooked for weeks." Jamie sipped his drink then let out a huge belch. "That does feel better."

"The dogs look comatose." Marshall sat beside Jamie on the sofa.

"Are they okay? They look dead." Jamie nudged Django with his toe. The dog snorted and rolled over.

"Turkey coma. I think they ate half a bird between them." Ellie shook her head. "I still can't believe your mother had plates for the dogs."

CJ walked into the living room and sat on the floor next to his mother. He had a large turkey sandwich in one hand. "Man, I love leftovers on Thanksgiving." He held out his food. "Anybody want a bite?"

The adults groaned. CJ shrugged his shoulders and went to work.

"Too bad Seth couldn't make it," Marshall said.

“Music comes first with him.” Ellie saw the look that passed between the two men. Bad news for sure.

Later that night, after CJ went to bed, Ellie and Marshall took the dogs out. The night was clear, a million stars in the sky.

“So what’s going on with Seth?” Ellie asked. “I haven’t heard from him in a while.”

“How long?” Marshall asked.

“End of last month, I think.”

Marshall put his arm around her shoulder. “Rumor has it Jennie has taken up with one of her band members.”

“Seth?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Ellie.”

“Have you seen them together?” She was finding it a little hard to breathe.

“No, but Seth moved out last time he was in New York. He wanted to give us some privacy, at least that’s what he said.”

Ellie nodded. “We didn’t have any claims on each other.”

“Are you okay?” Marshall asked. “Jamie didn’t want to tell you but I thought you should know.”

“I’m glad you told me.” She blinked back the tears.

“Shit, I’m so sorry.” He wrapped both arms around her.

Ellie buried her face in his chest. “I didn’t think it would hurt this much.”

“Cry on me,” Marshall whispered.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I love Christmas, always have. A last blast before the winter doldrums set in. Music, lights, great food, lots of parties. And presents! We had terrific Christmases when we were kids. Our mom made the best cookies and Dad actually acted like a human being. I remember lying on the floor with Ellie just staring at the Christmas tree. It looked magical to us. Ellie believed in Santa Claus till she was eleven, she was such a sweet kid. Holidays are difficult for her now, without all of us. She puts a good face on it, but she's hurting.

Ellie cranked up the thermostat again. She shivered. It was the coldest December in twenty years. Sub-zero winds from Canada blew across the lake, creating snow squalls and wreaking havoc with Christmas travelers. Ellie sighed and curled up on the couch with the dogs.

For the first time in her life, she was alone on Christmas Eve. CJ and Charlie took off on a ski trip before the weather turned really bad. It was kind of a relief not to have to cook a big dinner on Christmas Day. She received invitations to spend the holidays with Patti and with Marshall, but she decided to get her application to Cornell finalized and work at the emergency clinic. She was beat from going to school and dealing with her divorce. She needed a couple of days of doing nothing.

She looked at the Christmas tree framed in the front window of her house. The lights bathed the room in a soft glow and reflected off the shiny ornaments.

“We should go to bed, guys, or Santa won’t come,” she said to the dogs. “We’ll have a nice cheese omelet tomorrow, then you can open your presents.”

Ellie stretched and watched the fire burn. Maybe they would sleep down here. Perfectly comfortable, she burrowed into the sofa and closed her eyes...

Why were dogs barking and who was ringing bells? Ellie opened her eyes and tried to wake up. The dogs stood at the front door barking, tails wagging. She staggered to her feet and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the fireplace. Great, she had severe bedhead and a red mark that looked like a scar on her cheek. Probably from sleeping pressed against the sofa cushion. The fire had gone out. She must have slept for hours.

She shushed the dogs and opened the front door, fully expecting Patti and Dee. A large figure stood on the porch swathed in a parka, scarf and hat. Ellie looked down and saw the guitar case clutched in one hand.

“Can I come in? I’m freezing my ass off out here,” Seth asked just as Django jumped and knocked him into a snow bank.

It took ten minutes to extricate Seth from the bank and round up Django who was romping through the snow, barking madly. Ellie wiped off the dog while Seth unwrapped himself from several layers of clothing. Ellie restarted the fire. The room smelled of pine and wet dog. Seth still looked cold so she put a blanket over him.

“What are you doing here?” Ellie handed him a glass of brandy.

“People actually live here? Voluntarily?” Seth gulped the brandy. “Two hours to drive from the airport. I counted fourteen cars off the road and those were only the ones I could see. Do they find the bodies in the spring?” He finished the drink. “I’ve never been so cold in my life.”

Ellie laughed. “You’ll thaw out eventually.”

“Come here and warm me up.” He opened the blanket and gestured for her to sit next to him.

Ellie perched on the other end of the couch and eyed him. “You never said why you’re here.”

Seth rolled his eyes. "To spend Christmas with my girl, of course. Is CJ here? I'd like to meet him."

"He's on a ski trip with his father," Ellie said. "And I'm not your girl."

"Okay, my woman then. Now come over here so I can kiss you."

"What happened to Jennie?" Ellie asked.

"Jennie?" Seth was puzzled. "She's in New York with her family, I guess. Why?" He moved over on the couch toward her.

Ellie stood. "I thought you'd be with her. Did you have a fight?"

"Fight? No, what are you talking about? What's the matter with you? I thought you'd be glad to see me." He slumped back on the couch. "You're seeing some one else."

"I'm not seeing anyone. Look around. Do you see any one here?" She gestured to her rumpled flannel pajama bottoms and old T-shirt. "Do I look like I'm entertaining?"

"You look like you've been sleeping on the couch with the dogs." Seth stood and grabbed her. "What's going on?"

"You tell me." She shoved him away. "You and Jennie have a thing. Right?"

"What? Me and Jennie? No way." Seth laughed. "You're jealous."

"Marshall said you moved out," Ellie said a little uncertainly.

"Yeah, I did. I wanted them to have some privacy." He reached for Ellie again. "And frankly, a couple of times I saw stuff no healthy straight guy needs to see."

"They were here for Thanksgiving, in the room next to mine. I understand what you mean." She was starting to melt. "But Marshall was sure that she's involved with someone in her band."

Seth pulled her closer. "She is," he whispered. "But not with me, with Ollie."

"Ollie?" Ellie looked in his eyes.

"I know. No accounting for taste. But they seem pretty happy." He sat them on the couch again. "I would have told you if my feelings for you had changed. Nothing's changed, Ellie, I still love you."

Ellie's head spun. She touched his cheek. "Do you still want that kiss?"

Seth kissed her lightly, softly as if unsure of his place. Ellie opened her mouth and drew him in. Seth's moan of pleasure encouraged her and she climbed in his lap. He was the best Christmas present ever.

"I missed you so much, Ellie," Seth murmured.

"Me too." She brushed away tears.

"Don't cry." He licked at a tear. "Be happy."

"I am." Ellie nodded fervently. She threw the blanket on the floor. "You still look cold. We need some body heat." She yanked off her shirt and shimmied out of the pj bottoms.

"Is this my Christmas present?" Seth gulped.

"One of them." Ellie lay on the blanket and held out her arms. "Get down here before the dogs move in."

Later they cocooned on the floor in front of the fire. "I like your place," Seth said. "Very minimal."

"Charlie took all the furniture. So I got just what we needed. It makes it a lot easier to clean."

"I'll bet. Did you by any chance buy a bed?"

"Yes, a nice big one. Upstairs. Would you like to see it?" Ellie stood and pulled him to his feet.

"Thought you would never ask." He took her into his arms. "The floor was killing my back."

* * *

"Somebody abandoned this poor little guy." Ellie stroked the shivering kitten while Seth watched. They stood in the emergency clinic. Seth wanted to see where she worked.

"He's scared, but he seems to like you," Seth observed as the kitten huddled closer in Ellie's arms. "What are you going to do with him?"

"We'll check him out, feed him, then he'll go to the SPCA."

“And?”

“He’ll get neutered and someone will adopt him.” Ellie scratched his ears. “He’s really cute. Look at his eyes, one blue and one green.” She grabbed a couple of bits of kibble from the bowl on the desk and offered it to the kitten. He sniffed hesitantly and scarfed it. She hand-fed him a little more, then offered him some water.

“Let me get him in a cage. We can go as soon as Dina gets here. She’s the tech on the next shift.”

“Why don’t you just take him home?” Seth asked. “You know you want to.”

She did. She’d wanted a cat for a while now. The kitten looked up at her, squeezed his eyes shut and started to purr.

“Looks like a love match to me.” Seth smiled. “You’re never going on tour with me, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“This is what you want, to take care of these beasts.” He reached out a finger and stroked the kitten.

“Yes.”

“You’ll make a wonderful vet.”

And that was when Ellie knew it was over. They could have this short time together, then go their separate ways. His career would take off and he would fall in love with someone else. They would hear about each other through Marshall.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Maybe you can't have it all. It seems that way for Ellie. But she's sticking to her guns, deciding her own future and that makes me very proud of her.

The damn cat can see me. Every time I pop in to see my sister, the cat spots me and goes nuts running around, meowing, flipping itself in the air. It's been months and he still freaks. He's driving the dogs batty too, never gives them a minute's peace. Now that is kind of fun to watch. Good thing Ellie doesn't have a lot of breakable stuff. But the little bastard loves her and that's the most important thing.

"What did you do this time, Spike?" Ellie picked up the cat from a shredded pile of tissues. The cat arched under her chin and purred. The dogs sat on the floor giving her their "not me" looks.

"Don't look so superior, you two, I'm still mad about the garbage can."

"Mom, Mom, it came," CJ cried as he ran into the house. He held a big fat envelope in his hand."

"From RIT?" she croaked. The Rochester Institute of Technology was CJ's first choice on his list of colleges.

"Yes." He held the envelope out to her. "You open it. I can't."

"It's thick. If it were a rejection, it would be thin."

"I could be on the wait list."

Ellie snatched the envelope and tore it open. A sheaf of forms fell all over the floor. She opened the letter on top. "You got in, you're accepted."

"Really? They accepted me?" CJ's voice was filled with wonder.

"Of course they did, because my son is a genius."

"Can I go really? Can we afford it?"

"Yes. Thanks to Uncle Kit."

CJ looked at the ceiling. "Thank you, Uncle Kit."

Spike tore into the kitchen and flipped himself in the air.

"See he's happy too."

"Mom, face it. The cat is retarded." He hugged her and spun her around. "I have to call Dad." CJ ran out of the kitchen, clutching the letter.

Ellie picked up the papers. She had received a letter from Cornell too. She hadn't been accepted. They had wait-listed her. Everything was up in the air.

* * *

"I need to make a back-up plan," she told Patti the next day.

"You can always reapply or go to grad school here," Patti replied. "And you may still get in."

"Well if I don't, I need to come up with something else. I can't do nothing."

"You could redo the house," Patti suggested.

"I like it simple. Besides, I might sell the house to Charlie."

Patti shrieked. "How can you do that? Where would you live?"

"Don't know. But this place is too big for me and since Charlie's getting married, he wants the space. This way CJ keeps his room."

"You think he'll marry her?"

"Sure, he needs to be married. He's probably sick of doing his own laundry."

"You're way too nice to him," Patti said.

"No I'm not. He has to make restitution on the money he stole from the trust and he's willing to pay market value on the house." Ellie looked out the window. "It frees me up."

"When is the divorce final?"

"A few months, according to Frannie. With the financial details worked out, it'll go faster."

"I really thought he would string things out. He was always such a procrastinator."

"He had a come-to-Jesus meeting with Frannie. She pointed out that stealing from my trust could get him disbarred. She laid out the financial plan to him and made him see that if he wanted to keep his law license he should agree to it."

"She's good. If I ever need a divorce I'm calling her."

"You'll never get divorced."

"True. Murder maybe, but not a divorce." Patti picked up Spike and cuddled the cat. "You aren't going to turn into one of those weird women who have dozen cats are you?"

"No, two dogs and a cat are enough."

"It's a start."

"Very funny. If the herd increases, whack me on the head."

"Sure, happy to help. Have you heard from the beast?"

"Not recently. Since the CD was released, they've been booking tour dates in bigger venues. Did you see him on Letterman the other night?"

"Yeah, he looks good on TV. I like the way he swings his hair."

"He hates doing that, but it's all part of the act."

"So are you two over?"

"He calls, I call. But it feels like he's going through the motions. We don't have any common ground. We were together for such a short time. It's hard to sustain a relationship long distance."

"You need to spend some time with him. You love the guy."

"I do, but he probably doesn't remember what I look like."

“Do you remember what he looks like?”

Ellie closed her eyes and pictured Seth. She remembered every detail of his face and body—the way he laughed, the way his hands moved over the guitar, the fierce passion of his lovemaking. She remembered his smell, the way his hair felt when she tunneled fingers through it, the softness of his lips and the way he felt when he was buried deep inside her.

She opened her eyes and looked at Patti. “No, not really.”

Chapter Thirty

Woo-hoo, she made it. Ellie is realizing her dream, and it only took twenty years, a lying cheating husband and a little help from me to get her there. She, however, did most of the work. So why am I still hanging around? Feels unfinished, like something else has to fall into place. Well, today is moving day, she'll do fine.

"Center it in front of the window please." Ellie pointed to the bow window in the living room. "I measured. It should fit."

The movers wrestled the over-stuffed sofa in place. It looked great.

An hour later, the movers finished. Ellie paid them, giving a generous tip. The little house on the lake suited her exactly. Small enough to maintain and big enough to have company. She liked having CJ a short drive away too. He planned to visit some weekends.

Patti shouted from the kitchen. "The cupboards are lined. I'll start unpacking your stuff."

Ellie went to help.

"I love this place," Patti declared. "You can see the water from almost every room. I may never go home."

"Stay as long as you want. I'd love the company."

"You're going to be too busy once your classes start."

"I know. I was reviewing the material for the anatomy course." Ellie chewed her lip. "I'll never keep up."

"Sure you will. Cornell doesn't accept dummies."

Ellie grabbed another box.

* * *

"What about a house-warming present?" Jamie asked.

"She needs a couple of comfy chairs for the porch. The weather will be warm for the next couple of months. It would be a nice place to have breakfast in the morning." Marshall slammed the door of the big SUV.

"Great idea. Let's get her a little table to put her coffee on too. Why does she need two chairs?"

"You always buy chairs in twos," Marshall replied. "I saw a place that sells Amish furniture. We'll stop there."

They returned to Ellie's house, the SUV loaded down with groceries, two rocking chairs and a small table.

"What's all this?" Ellie came out of the house.

"Just a few things to get you started, Ellie-Belly. We should call you Dr. Ellie-Belly."

"Not yet, don't jinx me."

"Django likes it here." Jamie pointed to the lake. Somehow the dogs had gotten out. Django played in the water and Sammy ran up and down the shore barking. "But maybe you should have found a nice apartment closer to the campus."

Ellie whistled. The dogs came running and Ellie held her arms out.

"She's a nut," Jamie said.

"Yeah, but a nice nut." Marshall opened the back of the SUV. "Let's get these chairs on the porch."

* * *

It's so quiet here, Ellie thought as she watched the sun set. While Spike curled up on her lap, the dogs snored at her feet. Everyone had left that morning after breakfast. She was alone and she liked it. She had a

lot to do in the house. Classes started in less than a week. But she just sat breathing the air, listening to the quiet.

She was thinking about going in when Django leapt to his feet and barked. He jumped off the porch and ran around the house with Sammy hot on his heels. Then the dogs quieted and a very familiar voice came from the driveway.

"Django, buddy, how's the boy?" Django woofed in response. "Hey Sammy, where's your mama?"

Ellie sat down hard in the rocking chair. Seth. Great, just when she had settled in to her new life, along comes this man. Honestly, did he think he could drop in and out of her life? By the time he worked his way around to the porch, Ellie was sitting with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Hey, Ellie, nice place." He waved at the lake. "What a view."

Why did he have to look so good? He wore jeans and an old Grateful Dead T-shirt and he still was tasty enough to eat.

"What happened to your hair?" Ellie gulped. It was short, clipped at the sides and longer on top.

"Cut it. I needed a change." He smiled at her and she melted. "Do you like it?"

"Yes, but how will you swing your hair?"

"Ah, you caught that." Seth sat down in the other rocker. "This is very comfortable."

"Answer the question," Ellie demanded.

"I don't need to swing it anymore."

"Why?"

"I'm not touring. Jennie's pregnant. She and Ollie got married last week."

"So you figured you'd come here, hang out for a while, make me fall in love with you all over again and then leave?" She stood up and ran down to the water.

"Wait, that's not it at all." Seth caught up. He managed to grab her arm and pull her to him. "Just listen for a minute."

She pushed him away. "Go ahead, talk."

"I never should have asked you to go on the road with me. I saw how serious you were about becoming a vet at Christmas. It really made me mad." He took her hand. "All I could see was rejection. Then after a while, I stopped being angry because I looked at it from your point of view. I wanted you to give up everything for me. That's what you've always done, isn't it?"

Ellie nodded.

"I decided to make some changes to my life."

"Like what?"

"I got accepted into a program at Cornell. They gave me a teaching assistant position too. I'll have a doctorate in fine arts."

Ellie looked at him in shock. "But what about performing?"

"I'll perform with my students and there's a couple of clubs in town. Jennie and I are working on her next album. I'm doing the arrangements. I can go to New York once in a while." He stepped closer. "It'll work out. I missed you this last year."

"I'm starting school on Monday. It's overwhelming. I won't have time for..." She stopped because he was laughing at her. She punched his arm. "What's so funny?"

"I can see the wheels turning in your mind. You're thinking about taking care of me, that you'll have to get up an hour early to make my breakfast." He kissed her.

He knew her so well.

"I don't need a maid or a mom or even someone to take care of Django." He twirled a red curl around his finger. "I'll do something different, see if I can compose, get some inspiration from my students, slow down. Most of all I want you. I want to see you pursue your passion, cheer for you, like you always do for me. And, kick you in the butt when you need it."

"I'm going to smell like formaldehyde and cow intestines," she warned.

"I can live with that. We'll take a lot of showers."

"I won't be able to cook much, and I'll have to study most nights." She stepped closer and laid her head on his chest. "I'll be bitchy and won't want to have sex."

"I can help there. Sex relieves tension."

"You can't live here." She pulled away.

"Who said anything about living together?" He tried to look shocked but failed. "I rented a perfectly nice apartment."

"But maybe we could have sleepovers." She felt herself caving.

"Well, maybe on nights you don't smell like cow guts," he added.

"I guess we can see how it goes." She looked into his eyes and saw a reflection of herself. "Hey, did I hear you say you love me?"

"Always pushing it." Seth sighed. "Of course I love you, you dope."

"Good, but you still can't live here." She led him toward the house.

"Did I mention that my apartment is a month-to-month lease?" He grasped her around the waist and kissed her. When they came up for air, Ellie saw Django swimming.

"Better get your dog." She pointed to the lake.

"That water looks cold."

"I'm sure we can get you warm again."

Epilogue

"C'mon, you guys. Everyone's waiting," Patti yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

"We'll be right there." Ellie shut the bedroom door and watched Marshall fuss with his hair for the tenth time. "Stop. You'll be bald if you keep this up."

"I'm losing my hair?" He looked aghast.

"No, you look great," Ellie reassured him. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be." He took a deep breath. "You think Kit would be happy about this?"

"Sure, and I know he would approve of Jamie." Ellie took his arm and kissed his cheek. "Want me to hold your hand?"

"And catch me if I pass out."

Ellie shook her head. "You appear in front of hundreds of people every night, and every night you get at least three standing ovations." Marshall had the lead in a new Broadway musical. The show was a hit and Marshall's star was on the rise.

"That's work, this is my life." He grasped her hand. "Okay, we better go, before he changes his mind."

Ellie looked out the window. Everyone gathered on the beach. Jamie's family, Patti and Joe, CJ, Josh, Marsh's mom and Norrine's family. A large contingent of jazz musicians and theater people milled around. And there was Seth tuning his guitar. Jennie stood next to him laughing at her fat dimply son.

Ellie waved and caught Seth's eye. He smiled up at her and she melted. She made a strumming motion. He nodded and whispered in

Jennie's ear. Jennie handed the baby to Ollie and took her spot next to Seth. The music wafted into the window.

"Let's get you married." Ellie led Marshall down the stairs. Jamie waited at the bottom, his smile incandescent.

"Thought you'd never get here." Jamie took Marshall's hand. He kissed Ellie's cheek. "I can handle it from here."

"See you outside." Ellie hurried out the door and took her place next to CJ. He looked a little befuddled.

"This is just like a real wedding," he whispered.

"It is a real wedding," she whispered back.

"That's what Seth said. He said you guys were next."

"He did, did he?" Ellie smiled to herself. "We'll see about that."

Things are good, as they should be. Marshall just promised to love and cherish till death do them part. It's time for me to go. I'm tired. I wish I knew if I'll see them again. Wait... Mom? Dad? Have you been here all along?

I'm ready to go home. I know, death doesn't matter much. Love goes on forever.

About the Author

Margie has spent most of her life with her nose in a book. She takes breaks to work, raise her daughter and perform other necessary functions. But she resents the intrusion. She has mastered the art of reading at bowling alleys, roller-skating rinks and Chuck E. Cheese. She tried reading in a movie theater once, but the itty-bitty book light was too bright. Every time she opens a book, whether a familiar old friend or an undiscovered treasure, the thrill is there. She hopes to write stories that give readers the same thrill. To learn more about Margaret Wilson, please visit www.margiewilson.com. Send an email to Margaret at mdwilson43@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Margaret! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MargieWilson>.

It was nothing personal, just a business arrangement.

Nothing Personal

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Ryan McKay is a multi-millionaire with a problem. He needs a bride to fulfill the terms of his grandfather's will. Unfortunately, the one he chose just bailed on him and he's hours away from losing his company. Enter Faith Lewis—his demure, devoted assistant. Ryan convinces Faith to step in and marry him, assuring her their marriage is merely a business deal. Ryan is certain he can keep this strictly impersonal. After all, he's the product of a loveless marriage and for years has sealed his own heart in an icy stone. Despite Faith's warmth, compassion and allure, he's convinced he's immune to her charms.

Faith will do anything for her boss, but—marry him? The shy virgin sees herself as plain and unattractive, a product of a bitter mother who drummed into her head that she wasn't worthy of a man's love. But she agrees to help Ryan fulfill the terms of his grandfather's will, hoping she doesn't lose her heart to him in the process.

But love rarely listens to logic, and what follows is anything but business.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nothing Personal*:

She tried to stand patiently while Ryan slowly slipped each satin covered pearl button from its tiny loophole. But his touch did things to her sense of equilibrium. She shivered each time his warm knuckles brushed the bare skin of her back.

"Are you cold?" Ryan's voice whispered softly against her ear.

"Not really."

"You're shivering."

"Um...yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know." *Liar.*

Ryan's hands stilled. "Does my touch bother you?"

His touch most definitely bothered her. But not in the way he thought.

"No, it's fine. Go ahead."

She steeled herself against any more outward signs of his effect on her. It wouldn't do at all to fall into bed with him, no matter how much his skin on hers made her tingle. She'd made a bargain for two months and needed that time to get to know her new husband.

These were new sensations, new feelings, and her senses were already on overload from the day's events. She couldn't handle much more without a complete meltdown.

But then his hands moved lower as he freed the buttons near her bottom. The chills returned.

"I think there's enough undone now that I can get out of this thing," she stammered.

"Just a few more," he said, ignoring her request. Obviously his touch on her skin didn't affect him at all. "Do you need me to help you take it off?"

"No!" Faith cringed, not meaning for her denial to sound so forceful. She turned to Ryan. His gray eyes darkened like smoldering storm clouds. Maybe he wasn't so oblivious to the contact between them. "What I meant to say was, I can get this off by myself. But thank you, anyway."

He threw her a crooked smile. Now that her dress was all but slipping off her body, why didn't he leave?

"I'll just wait here while you change, in case you need me again. No need wandering the halls half-naked for help."

Half-naked. Her cheeks flushed with heat. The dress was completely open in the back, and she had her hands firmly pressed against her chest to keep it from dropping to the floor. "It's almost falling off me right now, Ryan. I hardly think I'll need any more assistance. But thank you for your help. Goodnight."

Hoping he'd grab a clue that she wanted to be alone to undress, she fled to the dressing area.

The satin nightgown. She had no other choice. It was either that or eat her sandwich naked. Bet Ryan would like that. The way his eyes had gleamed when he saw her in her wedding gown led her to believe there might be a spark of interest.

She pushed the thought aside. Ridiculous. Ryan McKay had never been interested in her. Why would he be? She was nothing like the women he escorted. Not even close.

Attempting to redirect her thoughts to her hunger, she removed her underthings and slipped the gown over her head. Unable to resist, she ran her hands down the cool satin. A quick glance in the mirror shocked her. The gown molded to her body like a lover's hand, clearly showcasing every minimal asset she had.

Why hadn't she heard the door close? Surely Ryan had left by now. Faith waited a few more seconds for the sound of the door closing, but didn't hear anything.

"Ryan?"

"Yeah?"

He was still there but his voice was muffled.

"What are you doing?"

"Eating."

"Oh." She peered around the doorway into the bedroom. He sat at the table next to her bed, eating one of the sandwiches Leland had fixed for her.

"You haven't eaten yet, Faith. Come out and have one of these sandwiches."

"No, that's okay. I'm not that hungry, really." Right. She was surprised Ryan couldn't hear her stomach grumbling in the other room.

"Don't be ridiculous. Come out here now and eat with me."

Fortunately the gown had a matching satin wrap that she quickly donned. Hunger won out over modesty. She wanted to get some food before he ate it all. She tightened the belt on the robe and entered the bedroom.

As she crossed in front of him, his eyes widened. Faith clutched the edges of the robe over her chest, feeling less than adequate in a gown

that should have been worn by a goddess like Erica, not by her. She didn't do it justice.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Faith nodded. "Starving. I hadn't realized that I hadn't eaten until Leland mentioned something about food."

Ryan smiled. "I know. When I saw the food on the table my stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. You don't mind, do you?"

"Why would I mind?" She grabbed a sandwich and tried not to shove it in her mouth. With as much dignity as she could muster considering the depth of her hunger, she took a bite of the delicious turkey sandwich.

He sipped a glass of tea and watched her eat. At first she was self-conscious, but then her appetite took over and she downed the sandwich in no time flat.

Satisfied, Faith sat back and took a drink. And still he stared at her.

"Is something wrong?" She knew he wanted to say something, but didn't. She chewed her lip in anticipation.

Without a word he reached across the table and drew his thumb against the corner of her mouth, then slowly dragged it across her bottom lip. Faith watched in rapture as he brought his thumb to his mouth and licked it with agonizing slowness.

"You had mayonnaise on the corner of your lip," he said, his voice low and oh-so-sexy.

Was he deliberately trying to drive her crazy? She grabbed the napkin and swept it across her mouth. "Thank you."

His dark eyes warmed her. "It was my pleasure."

She couldn't tear her gaze away from him, despite knowing she should stop whatever was happening between them. She simply could not deal with any more today.

Thankfully, Ryan stood. "I'm sure you're tired. I'll let you get some sleep."

Faith rose from the table, nodding. "Thank you for your help with the dress."

“You’re welcome,” he said and stepped toward her, taking her hands in his. He pulled her against his chest and slid his arms around her back.

The crisp hairs of his chest rubbed her breasts. The thin silk of the gown and robe did little to keep the heat of his body from hers. Her nipples hardened against him, the rush of desire almost dropping her. Her limbs turned to gelatin and she felt weightless and lightheaded.

“Two months, Faith,” he said softly as his head dipped towards her. “That’s a very long time. Are you sure?”

This wasn’t fair. No one had ever held her like this, made her feel such uncontrollable need. She wanted so much to experience these feelings, to step toward that desire and know what she hadn’t known before. Blood pounded at her temples and liquid heat pooled deep within her. She was certain Ryan could sense her reaction because he tightened his hold on her, his hands softly kneading the muscles of her back, gradually sliding lower and lower.

“I...it’s...you agreed to it.” Pitiful excuse.

“I know. How stupid of me.”

The smoke-filled depth of his eyes drew her in, hypnotizing her senses, rushing over her like a wildfire out of control.

If his lips drew any closer they’d touch hers. Faith was sure she’d die if they did. She was already losing control, inhaling his scent with rapid breaths, his hands burning against the silk of her gown, drawing her ever nearer to the heat of his lips.

Then just as suddenly as it started, the storming inferno was over. Ryan stepped back, his lips parted as the hint of a smile crossed his features.

“Tomorrow, you move into my bedroom. Goodnight, Faith.”

He turned around and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Faith stood in the middle of the room, wondering what had just happened. Her breathing still hadn’t returned to normal. The rhythm of her heart continued to pound its staccato beat. She still felt him, smelled him, all but tasted him on her lips as the memory of his thumb against her mouth singed her skin.

Despite her thoughts about needing to wait, wanting to wait, she had been ready to leap into her husband's arms.

She thought she had more self-control than that. It was obvious her inexperience was no match for the powerful charm of Ryan McKay. She'd have to be extra careful over the next couple months and try to keep her distance from him. Too much of his overpowering sexuality and she'd self combust. Clearly, she was not ready at all for an intimate encounter with Ryan.

Two months wasn't nearly long enough.

And yet, two months was a very long time.

Can a man who knows he shouldn't, resist a woman who knows she can't?

Midnight Temptation

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Available in print and ebook

Raven Remington has secrets. Only one of which is how badly he wants his personal assistant, Vanessa Kaye, the beauty who refuses to be anything more than professional. A smart man would remove himself from temptation, but Raven can't quite make himself ignore the longing in her eyes or the taste of her kiss. Soon, neither of them can fight their passion.

What Raven doesn't know is that Vanessa has secrets of her own...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Midnight Temptation*:

"I'm not in love with her."

"I heard you last time," Sky laughed. "You missed a spot on the back fender!"

Raven shook his head. He'd promised their mother he'd be there early to spend time with the family, but the idea of how to get Vanessa to accept her "company car" hit somewhere around four in the morning and he doubted he'd get another such opportunity to do the work himself any time soon. A fast change into jeans he'd cut only that morning and a pair of work boots he hadn't worn in years and he'd been ready. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to get rid of Sky. He'd rather have been alone, but Sky claimed wild horses couldn't keep him away.

Raven didn't have time to stop at the stables to find out.

He brought the hammer down on the trunk. The slide of the handle was nearly as satisfying as the screech and crunch of the head impacting the metal. Paint cracked, flecks flew everywhere. Again and again he raised the sledgehammer, bringing it down from the highest point of his

reach until the trunk was a mangled, dimpled mess. Just the way it should be.

“Whose car is that and why do you hate them?”

Raven finished his swing before looking up. Jordan must have talked their best friend into a visit as well because there stood his childhood buddy on a sand dune, looking crisply rumpled and vaguely irritated. You’d think as a doctor he’d be more accustomed to little sleep.

Perry Chase circled the front of the car, eying it from behind his sunglasses before joining Sky near the water’s edge just out of the hammer’s arc.

“Welcome to the fine art of Motor Vehicle Demolition!” Sky pointed with both hands at the mangled machine.

Raven rolled his eyes, took a drink from the water bottle he’d nestled in the sand at Sky’s feet and put it back. “Ignore him, Chase, I think he got into some old RMI samples.”

“Normally, I would, but since you’re the one half-naked pounding a—” Chase tore off his sunglasses. “Oh, God, was that an AMG Coupe?” He sounded pained. He probably was. Chase was a bona fide car buff. Oh well. Raven lifted the hammer again, ready to get back to it.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Sky voice, full of pride and laughter, made Raven’s back twitch.

“You Remingtons are a sick bunch,” Chase grumbled.

“Just wait till he uses the power sander.”

“How long has he been at it?”

“Oh, an hour or two. Can you believe it, he had the forethought to stop at the shop this morning and have them disable the security alarm.”

“Am I supposed to be shocked at the forethought or the destruction?”

“Hell, you can pick. I’ve never seen him like this. I’m amazed he hasn’t broken a window, but he always was good with tools. Could never make a damn thing but handled them well.”

“As you can see,” Raven said over his shoulder to Chase, “Sky’s practicing to become a sports announcer.”

“Or a used car salesman,” Chase agreed dryly. At least someone else thought Sky was out of his mind.

"I'm allowed to be impressed," Sky argued. Of all the damn things to finally impress him with, why did it have to be this?

"Why are you enjoying this so much? I thought you liked cars." Chase's voice bordered on betrayal.

"Raven's in love."

Raven wiped the sweat off his brow with a gloved hand, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up. He could forget the car and drag Sky into the ocean, maybe hold him under the water until he got some peace and quiet. Satisfying, maybe, but ultimately unproductive. Better to conserve his energy for what needed to be done. Still, he could request a little silence. "Kiss my ass, Sky."

"He's been telling me that all day," his brother explained to their guest. Did he have to sound so happy about it? Any other day, saying that could ensure a good month of silence.

"I thought there'd have to be icicles all over the place and a little horned, red guys skating around for Raven to fall in love."

"Thank you!" Raven spun around to tip an imaginary hat to his friend. He leaned on the upside down hammer pole and pointed to Chase for his brother's benefit. "You see? That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you all damn morning."

Sky nudged Chase with an elbow. "Would *Raven* expend this kind of energy destroying a seventy-thousand dollar car for anything but love?" Sky asked, nonplussed. "Take a look at the inside. He cut the leather seats to ribbons, but he's brilliant with a roll of duct tape. That takes attention to detail. If it wasn't for her, you think he would have bothered making sure the springs were all safely padded and sealed?"

Chase's face skewed, his brown eyes inspecting Raven as if he were some kind of lab rat. "He's got a point. You don't even *wash* your own car, much less repair it. Couldn't you have hired someone to do this?"

Raven stood there, staring at them for a few seconds. He wanted to refute them, but they'd stumbled on the hole in his logic, damn it. It still didn't mean they were right. It meant he was getting to be as much of a control freak as Sky. He didn't have time to be arguing with them when he knew what and why he was doing. "Screw both of you."

"I always figured that when Raven finally fell in love with somebody I'd have to leave the country to maintain my peace of mind. I never thought it would be this much fun." Sky waved a dismissive hand at him when Raven turned to yell. "Yeah, yeah, kiss your ass, I got it. You're still missing that spot."

Annoyed instead of stressless, Raven went back to the repetitive swing of the hammer with more fervor. Obviously, marriage had sucked dry Sky's once impressive IQ. Sure, he *looked* deliriously happy. Losing your mind had that effect on you.

Granted, Evie turned out to be a decent, kind hearted woman, galling as that was to admit. Her son did happen to be smart and interesting; he even made Sky laugh. Their daughter might redefine the phrase "cute as a button" and none of them seemed to mind being in each other's presence, but did that mean love existed?

The car boomed a negative reply.

"Didn't think so."

Still, stupid or not, Sky did have an intolerable point. Raven felt...*something* for Vanessa. Whatever it was didn't seem in a hurry to go away, either. It was like having a splinter in his mind, this indefinable feeling. Whenever he looked at her—hell, whenever he thought about her—it welled up with a fierceness that almost crippled his control. It was worse when she was walking away from him.

"You're going to love this," Sky said, just before Raven tuned him out. No doubt he'd tell Chase all about his problem with Vanessa. Great.

Something had to be done, it was getting out of control. He had to ensure he could burn out the need for her before she realized she wanted more than a casual affair and that he was the last man on earth to give it to her.

His lip curled at the thought of what happened between them being called casual. He'd done casual. This wasn't it. A woman who made love the way she did... His stomach tightened just thinking about her face, her eyes, her body, even her voice. When it ended, she'd never be able to go back to the monastic life she once led. No, eventually, she'd be casual with someone else.

The hammer came down violently, slipping from his grasp and slashing into the sand several feet away, finally quieting his brother into pensive silence while he heaved in breath after breath.

Someone *else*?

Raven didn't like the dark thing slithering through him, something alien and unwanted. It took him another breathless second to identify it and when he did, he was incredulous.

Possessiveness? Him? He didn't have a possessive bone in his body; never had, never thought he would. But then again, hadn't he come home after all these years—taken control of Remington Medical Industries—because he longed for something of his own? Something to put his mark on?

He eyed the car. Leaving his mark wouldn't be a problem any longer. But was he trying to mark the car or the woman? Why? He couldn't own her. He didn't want to own her. He just wanted... He didn't know what the hell he wanted, damn it. All he knew was that this wasn't it. He wanted her. All of her. He wanted to know what she was hiding. Why she was so afraid. Why she wouldn't come to him. Most of all he wanted to know why he cared. But the answers weren't coming, not from this car and not from Vanessa.

Something would have to give.

In a takeover, occasionally concessions had to be made. Unpleasant ones. Change never happened without someone changing the status quo. Vanessa said she wasn't part of his life. Maybe she wasn't. But she would be. Soon.

He wasn't about to go to Sky's extremes, of course, but he was damn sick of doing nothing at all. Making room in his life for her didn't mean he was in love with her. It definitely wouldn't involve marrying her. This was just another acquisitions battle, that's all. Nothing that would require or inspire his heart.

He smiled, secure at last. How could it?

He didn't have one.

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